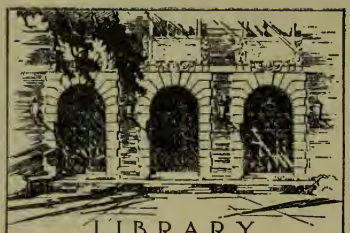

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TRIALS OF AN HEIRESS.

VOL. II.

TRIALS OF AN HEIRESS.

BY

THE HON. MRS. G. R. GIFFORD.

"Ed io pur vivo."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:
HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,
13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.
1869.

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LONDON:
PRINTED BY MACDONALD AND TUGWELL,
BLENHEIM HOUSE.

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TRIALS OF AN HEIRESS.

CHAPTER I.

"Their love
Lies in their purses—and whoso empties them
By so much fills their hearts with deadly hate."
Othello.

FROM this scene might be dated the beginning of troubles entailed by Mr. Marchmont's rash proposal to the widow at Bickleigh. He was extremely annoyed at the affair having so soon got wind, and he could not in his own mind entirely exonerate his lady-love from all blame in the matter.

However, the deed was done; Bessie's happiness, and perhaps his own (for an ugly doubt had begun to brood over his mind on the subject), had been sacrificed to the in-

dulgence of a passing whim, and to his blind opposition to the bent of her own young inclinations. The Colonel was sorrowfully but silently indignant. As he had anticipated, the prospect of a step-mother and another mistress at the home of which she had been paramount from her birth, already began to exercise an untoward influence on the young girl's character. She was rapidly becoming reserved, cold, and repellant, but given to passionate and uncontrollable outbursts of grief, and fitful gusts of affection with those whom she loved the best; in which category may now be placed side by side the names of Mrs. Kingdom and Colonel le Garde. The former was indeed as a mother to her, and very closely Bessie clung to her in the only real sorrow which she had known, and which only a womanly hand could touch while the wound was new.

One day she arrived early at the Rectory, and surprised Mrs. Kingdom in the act of writing a long letter, of which she at once guessed the destination; and without any of the pretty rosy confusion which used in

happier days to accompany the mention of the loved name, she said,

"Have you told Reggie *the* news, Mrs. Kingdom?"

"Well, I have, my dear, certainly. I could not well write to him without mentioning it, could I?"

"Oh dear no! He will not be surprised. He saw through that woman from the first."

"He never liked Mrs. Duberry much, certainly, although she was his friend's mother."

"He had a prophetic instinct, I suppose, of what she would prove to me. I came down this morning to say that when you were writing you could give my love to Reggie. Tell him he can write to me now if he likes. I am not going to sacrifice his happiness and my own to papa's prejudices any longer."

Mrs. Kingdom's eyes glistened under and through her spectacles, and she paused for a moment and laid down her pen.

"Bessie, my love!" she said, with faltering accents, "you will make him so happy!"

But then the high principle which was an element in her being struggled with the motherly instinct in her breast, and finally prevailed. "We should not be doing right, though, to make him happy at the expense of our own consciences. Your father has not forfeited his authority in his own family by the step which he has taken of his own free will; and you are not doing right, dear child, in resenting it so bitterly."

"Do not you turn against me, dear Mrs. Kingdom, or I shall indeed be alone in the world. Papa did not treat me with the slightest confidence, and yet he expects me quietly to surrender everything for the gratification of what can only be a selfish feeling of monopoly on his part. It is absurd to tell me that he can care a straw about me and act as he has done."

"I think you see things in a wrong light, my dear. I am not quick or clever enough to explain clearly what I mean, but you must acknowledge that the duties of parents towards their children are very different to the duties of children towards their parents."

"I always believed that affection and sincerity was the common duty of both," Bessie coolly replied.

"No doubt, but your father's affection for you has never been questioned; and as to his present unfortunate entanglement, I fear that the consequences of that will fall heaviest on himself."

"Not the heaviest, Mrs. Kingdom; that I cannot admit. They will fall heaviest upon me."

"You think so now, my dear, I have no doubt; but you are young, and will form other ties and attachments. It will not be so for him."

"Surely papa is old enough to have judged for himself, and to have seen what we have all seen, Mrs. Kingdom."

"We are all old enough to be wiser than we often prove. I do not like to hear you speak disrespectfully of your papa."

"I do not mean to be disrespectful, but I do so detest the woman he is going to put in mamma's place. If he does not find the future Mrs. Marchmont all he could wish, he

has no one to blame but himself. And as for my happiness, it is gone."

"Do not say that, my love. You are young, and the time will come when you will smile at all this, and wonder how it could ever have affected you. When you are a wife yourself—the wife of one who loves you better than any one else in the world—you will forgive 'poor papa' then."

This was a tender and delicate touch of the master-chord of "long ago." "Poor papa" had been a loving sort of word caress on Bessie's lips when she was a tiny child, and the Squire would often laughingly refer to it when he and his daughter had been on the old friendly footing; but it had dropped, like many other things, into neglect and disuse since the widow had begun to exercise her fatal influence over his life.

The loving memory was not called up altogether without effect. A tear gathered beneath the long fringing lashes, but was blinked hastily away; the wound was not at present too fresh in the young heart to make it anything but deeply resentful to-

wards the hand which had dealt the blow.

"You are a dear good woman," she said, putting her arms lovingly round Mrs. Kingdom's neck; "but you will never succeed in making me good now. I have a fire here," she added, putting her hand to her head; "and all I care for now is, that it should be over and done with without delay."

"What shall you do after—after the ceremony has taken place, my dear?"

"I shall go to Aunt Sophia in Belgrave Square. I shall remain away from Marchmont as long as I possibly can. To see her in my place, and the mistress in my home, is more than I can possibly bear."

"When is it to be—and where? We are quite in the dark about it, I assure you."

"Oh! early in the spring, in town; she wishes to have it so; and then they go abroad for six or eight weeks. *I* shall be in no hurry to return."

"Try not to think about it, my dear. Perhaps you will not find your step-mother so very disagreeable after all. I think she is anxious that you should like her."

"I hate her—I always did, and I always shall; and I will take care to let all the world see the dislike and contempt which I have for her."

"My dear!—my dear!" remonstrated Mrs. Kingdom. She felt and knew that there was something wrong about these outbursts of temper, which she thought Bessie would have been too "sensible"—that was the expression which she made use of in her own mind—to have indulged.

She was not, however, a deep observer of the intricacies of character, and she did not understand a nature which was far above her own in intellectual gifts, but which was liable to be swayed like a reed by the untoward incidents of circumstance or passions. "We know how circumstances and passion *will* sway the intellect, how mortified vanity will form excuses for itself, and how temper turns angrily upon conscience which reproves it," says one of the keenest of modern philosophers and wits.

And mortified pride or vanity, whichever you like to call it—more people like to be

called proud than vain—had much to do with Bessie's violent dislike to the intrusion of a stranger into what she had been so long taught to consider as her own proper and peculiar sphere. She had borne her honours very sweetly and without any undue parading of them before the world; and yet if you could have read the secrets of her bosom, you would have found that the love of sway was a ruling principle in her character.

The imagination of the young (of young girls in particular) is fond of the picturesque, and is ever arranging its surroundings, not in the light which others see them, but through the golden halo which emanates from itself.

Bessie Marchmont, although she would have despised anyone who had openly flattered her on the score of her position as the heiress of Marchmont, and on the power which such a position gave her over the minds of others, would not willingly have parted with one jot or one tittle of the importance derived from it. She had learned,

even during the short time that she had been "out," that there was a considerable difference even in the surface bearing of society towards her, and towards other young girls possessing equal personal or mental attractions (at least, so her modesty assured her, for she was innocent of mere personal vanity), but who were not the only daughters of wealthy and influential men. She had, in fact, become quite worldly enough bitterly to regret the prestige which was passing away from her as mistress of Marchmont, and of her father's house; and, like many other advantages which have been little dwelt upon during their undisputed possession, they were magnified tenfold in her eyes, now that they were about to be withdrawn from her grasp.

"I *hate* the woman!" we have heard her exclaim, with regard to her future step-mother; and there was no exaggeration in the language she employed. Mrs. Duberry's very presence inspired her with the same antipathy which some people feel for snakes,

bats, moths, and other repulsive insects or reptiles.

It was not a cheerful prospect for the future peace of the establishment, and the Squire was beginning to perceive and bitterly to resent the position of tacit antagonism maintained by his daughter towards his intended wife.

Mrs. Duberry had the tact not to intrude herself much on the inmates of the Hall during the time of her engagement. Fortune had come to her at last with both hands full, and her heart was too thankful to triumph unduly over the victim of her schemes. Obsequious tradesmen now begged for a continuance of the custom which they had before accepted more as a favour given than received. The "little accounts" for which "immediate" settlement had been demanded but a few posts before, in language more to the purpose than polite, were now to stand over to suit the convenience of the future Mrs. Marchmont—that lady, meanwhile, feeling herself for the first time

in her life in the prospective possession of "ample means."

There is perhaps no species of self-exaltation so gratifying as that entailed by the certainty of future competency when the former life has been a continual struggle to make five pounds do the duty of ten, twenty, fifty, or a hundred, as the case may be. No wonder if, under such circumstances, even Mrs. Duberry could be content to rest calmly on her oars, only alive to the one delicious conviction that all duns were gagged henceforth and for ever as regarded the straitened widow, so shortly to become a rich wife.

The Squire had acted "very handsomely," that lady's solicitor had informed her, in the matter of settlements. The continual recurrence of the clause "in case of issue" in the necessary documents, had had the effect of awakening Mr. Marchmont's mind to the full extent of the injury which his contemplated marriage might work to his daughter and present heiress, and consequently had also had the effect of embitter-

ing his mind towards her. The presence of those we have injured being in almost every case as a rankling thorn in our sides.

The impulsive Squire, whose head was only to be reached through his heart, had never counted the cost of the courtship which had ended in the proposal; and until the wording of the necessary settlements on his future wife, it had never occurred to him how deeply Bessie's prospects might be involved in his rash determination. A pang shot through his heart as he realised it for the first time as his eyes glanced down the sheet of the rough draught of the deed which had been drawn up by his solicitor, and sent down to him for his approbation. But a furtive glance at the cold proud face opposite to him at the breakfast-table, which met his without any sign of tender recognition, had the effect of steeling his half-relenting heart towards her, as the conviction shot into his mind that she was probably calculating the chances of such an event herself, and that her violent aversion to her future step-mother might possibly be ac-

counted for in this manner. This was the state of affairs between father and daughter; they were not altogether dissimilar between mother and son.

The hardest task—perhaps the *only* hard one that the widow had to perform—had been writing the letter containing the announcement of her intended marriage to Bertie. "Thank goodness he is away!" she said to herself as she sealed her letter with the signet ring which she always wore as a guard on her third finger, and which was engraved with the motto of the late Mr. Duberry—"*semper eadem.*" "I could not have faced him with the news; and I *could* write the little *bonne bouche* at the end, which I could not have said for fear of raising a hurricane, which he would have considered a matter of principle to assume if he did not feel it."

To show how little Mrs. Duberry could understand or appreciate her son's character, I will quote the "*bonne bouche*" in which she relied to take the bitter taste of her intended marriage out of his mouth.

"I cannot help thinking that there might be a chance for you with the heiress after all. The Squire is more dead against the Kingdom affair than ever; and I always suspected that *she* had a slight penchant for one who shall be nameless, but who will *now* be able to make the best use of his opportunities under the same roof with a very charming, as well as a very pretty girl, who will only be a sister in name."

"Mother, is this your teaching?" was Bertie's comment upon this effusion, as he tore it into a hundred fragments, the honest blood rushing into his face—the most painful that can dye the face of manhood—caused by deep shame for one who has been once implicitly believed.

Bertie's studies (and he was studying hard for the law) were spoiled for that day. The labour which had been so sweet to him, when in the dim perspective loomed a future spent under a roof which his own exertions should have lined with every luxury for her sake who had struggled and pinched for him, seemed now a thankless task; and the

thought recurred to him with two-fold bitterness from the ill-timed and indelicate inuendo—"How she will hate us!—how she will hate *me!* Oh! mother, why could you not be satisfied with my love, and with poverty, for my sake, for a little longer?"

At this moment a knock at the door caused him to start from the reverie into which he had fallen, and hastily to sweep into the waste-paper basket the fragments of his mother's letter, which were strewed about on the writing-table, as a well-known profile intruded itself through the half-open door.

"Not intruding, I trust," said the voice accompanying the profile, in half jocular, half deprecatory accents, accompanied by a peculiar parrot-like turn of the head. "Very agreeably occupied, my dear young friend, I have no doubt; but business is business all the world over, and I want to have a little talk with you this morning."

"You are quite welcome, Mr. Quince. Pray sit down," was Bertie's reply.

Mr. Quince, the family solicitor, had known

him all his life, and as a personal friend of his late father's was a privileged individual; but Bertie was never less inclined for a tête-à-tête than at that moment. Mr. Quince too was of a curious temper—a regular Paul Pry, in fact, and not altogether unlike the caricature to be found in old portfolios of Mr. Liston, in his personification of that interesting character. He took in all Bertie's surroundings at a glance—even to the scraps of torn paper which had escaped in the hurried swoop into the waste-paper basket.

"*Billet doux?*" he asked himself curiously, and with his mental head on one side; "no, not torn up—bill perhaps—much more likely," he went on, running himself through a regular catechism on the subject of the fragmentary document in question. It did not however prove quite satisfactory, so he proceeded to question his companion instead of himself.

"Am I to congratulate you, my dear young friend, upon an anticipated—ahem!—an anticipated happy event?"

"It is not a subject of congratulation to me, Mr. Quince, if, as I presume it is, my mother's intended marriage to which you allude."

"But surely, my dear boy, excuse me, but it seems only yesterday that I had you on my knee; but surely you are not averse to this marriage, so desirable as it appears to be in every way. In *every* way," the man of business added, with great stress.

"It would be rather reversing the usual order of things, I suppose, to say that it was all arranged without my *consent*" (this was said with a ghost of one of Bertie's old genial smiles); "but it was very much against my wishes, I assure you."

"Indeed—indeed, Mr. Herbert, but this surprises me—surprises me greatly. The settlements are most handsome, unusually so, indeed; and we (that is Mr. Quirk and myself) have felt ourselves justified in advancing to the good lady, your mother, a very handsome sum—a *very* handsome sum, I assure you—to make those little—ahem—those little——I am sure you understand me,

my dear young friend, so dear to ladies' hearts on such interesting occasions. A thousand pounds was the sum named, and upon the united security of the settlements, and, as a matter of form, of a note of hand from yourself, we have consented to sell out stock to that amount. I hope you will have no objection to sign this little acknowledgment to indemnify my partner and myself from any loss—as a matter of form—as trustees under your father's will we should otherwise be responsible."

Bertie held out his hand for the I. O. U. which awaited his signature, and the blood rushed again hotly into his face. His mother was already borrowing money upon her future prospects, and from Messrs. Quince and Quirk. His pride deeply rebelled against such a proceeding.

"I have your mother's letter somewhere about me," Mr. Quince remarked nervously, and making a pretence of feeling for it in his pocket. "Dear me, I thought I had it with me. Excuse me, Mr. Herbert, but an old and privileged friend of the family, you

know—and a little bird has whispered to me the probability of a double alliance between the families. Rumour is loud in the praises of a lovely young heiress to the Marchmont property. The *present* heiress —of course there are doubts—contingencies with regard to male issue, as our law terms have it. But in any case, my dear young friend, I wish you joy—it will be *all in the family*, and not a shilling of debt or mortgage on it. I wish you joy with all my heart."

"Mr. Quince," replied Bertie, at last, who had been vainly endeavouring to disturb the flow of this congratulatory oration, "I must beg to make the most unqualified denial of the probability or possibility of anything of the kind you hint at. Miss Marchmont is, I believe and hope, engaged to a friend of mine. I am greatly interested in the fulfilment of her happiness, which will not, I fear, be increased by the prospect of Mr. Marchmont's intended marriage with—my mother."

"Indeed—indeed! Accustomed to be mistress perhaps too long not to feel—

changed position—I see—I understand."

"I fear that she will feel it bitterly," Bertie answered, and the expression of his face was grave even to sternness.

"Dear me!—dear me! Well, no one can be surprised—young handsome woman like your mother not likely to remain a widow. Good match—most suitable every way. Would you have any objection, my dear Mr. Herbert, with regard to this little document—eh?"

"I should have had none, if my signing it would have placed my mother in a position to decline this marriage altogether. I will willingly make myself responsible for what—what is to come to me, Mr. Quince, and pay you and your partner the interest during my mother's life. What was the sum left to me under my father's will?"

"Six thousand pounds—to your mother for her life. Unable to touch the capital without your consent—same thing——"

"Can I place a thousand pounds of that money at her present disposal?"

"The arrangement suggested virtually the

same thing. Mr. Quirk and myself will advance the money on your signature to this receipt."

The truth now became clear to the perception of the young man. It was upon a part of the money that was to come to him on which his mother wished to raise a loan of a thousand, upon the security of his receipt for the same. Already she had begun to barter and to speculate in the stock not only of her own matrimonial market, but on those sacred and sealed feelings of her son's heart, which he had never dared to entertain even in that pure sanctuary, without feeling himself a traitor to the cause of his friend. Rude was the blow dealt at all the finer feelings of his nature, and it came with double bitterness from such a quarter.

"If you will sell out the six thousand and place it at my mother's disposal," he said, "I will give you a receipt for the sum. I have lived upon her slender means long enough, God knows! but this might have been prevented if I had been applied to in time."

"Can't be done—my partner and myself would not be justified, Mr. Herbert. One thousand's a different thing; there we strain a point to meet necessary expenses. Thirty thousand in settlements coming to the widow."

"I will sign what you like—anything you like, provided that everything is paid before my mother sets her foot over the threshold of Marchmont. I believe, indeed —I know that she has some debts."

"Better wait until after the ceremony, Mr. Herbert—plenty of money to settle all then."

"*No!*"

The monosyllable was thundered out with such energy, that Mr. Quince shrank back amazed.

"No—it shall never be said that my mother married to rid herself of pecuniary embarassments. *I will have every sixpence paid*, Mr. Quince, if I put pen to paper at all. I will go down and see my mother, and explain my conditions."

"Best plan—far the best. I applaud

your resolution, Mr. Herbert. Pray convey to the good lady your mother the best respects of myself and partner. Good morning, Mr. Herbert—good morning—*good* morning."

The last sentence was uttered as the eccentric man of business backed himself out of the room, leaving Bertie alone with some of the bitterest reflections that had as yet clouded the horizon of his life. His own mother—the mother whom he had once adored—had tampered with the world's pitch, and had not come out with her hands undefiled.

"Why could she not have told me of her difficulties?" he asked himself bitterly, "instead of employing a solicitor to speculate upon the sale of her own affections and of mine. Dearly as I could love Bessie if she were as free as air to-morrow, I would not try to win her now. I have suffered deep humiliation, and in the tenderest point. Mother, it was cruel of you!"

CHAPTER II.

"Thou bear'st a precious burden, gentle post."
Old Play.

SIX months after the marriage, which had taken place early in the spring, the pleasant room called the "breakfast-room" at Marchmont was occupied by a single tenant. Bessie was standing at the window in a thoughtful, abstracted mood, until disturbed by the entrance of Mr. Serschal and the post-bag, towards which she threw a wistful glance. It was not placed, as in the old times, by the side of the Squire's plate, but at the opposite end of the table, in a space cleared for it amongst cups and saucers, and in close proximity to the steaming urn. There was evidently a new element of authority at Marchmont.

Presently the door opened, and the mas-

ter of the house entered the room. His bearing was a trifle less erect, his step scarcely so firm as it had been six months ago. His daughter went up to him and imprinted a cold kiss upon his cheek.

"Is Mrs. Marchmont coming down to breakfast?" she asked, her eyes wandering to the spot where Mr. Serschal had deposited the post-bag.

"I really don't know, my dear—perhaps it would be better to send up and inquire."

As he spoke he laid a hesitating hand on the bell handle, and cast an uncertain look, not at Bessie, but in her direction—a look which in old times would have wrung her heart, for it was a feeble, weary look, which seemed to say to some one else, "Take the reins"—anything but the momentary moral exertion of asserting himself.

"I want the key of the post-bag, papa, so please ring the bell," was the decided reply.

The Squire did so, but when the butler appeared in answer to the summons, he looked at his daughter to take the initiative

in the matter, saying, at the same time, "What did we ring for—eh, my dear?"

Mr. Serschal's countenance assumed an expression meanwhile that had something of pity in it. An expression, indeed, becoming too common now in the faces of those among the worthy gentleman's dependants, who loved him the best.

Without, however, waiting for a reply to his question, he began himself to give a hasty and rather confused order to the effect that Mrs. Marchmont's maid should be sent to inquire whether her mistress would have her breakfast sent up to her room?—and if so, whether she would prefer tea or coffee—rolls or toast? and so on *ad libitum*, giving Bessie no opportunity of inserting her message to her step-mother which had reference to the key of the post-bag.

Quietly waiting with set lips and determined brow until the old man (how strange the expression with regard to the Squire would have appeared but a few months ago) had meandered on to the top of his bent, she called back the butler as he was some-

what fussily leaving the room, and said,

"Will you please tell Mrs. Rigors to bring down the key of the post-bag with the breakfast-tray, if her mistress is not coming down."

"Yes, Miss," was the reply—none of the old servants at the Hall had thrown off their allegiance to their "*young* mistress," as they delighted to call her in the presence of Mrs. Rigors the lady's-maid.

But there was not many of them left at Marchmont under the new *régime*. As Mr. Serschal, however, proceeded on his mission, he puffed between each asthmatic breath—

"It's as much as my life's worth—(wheeze)—oh, that *cat!*—(puff)—I'd like to see her claws drawn—(wheeze)—that I would—(puff)—but there's no chance of that now—(wheeze)—no chance at all"—(puff).

Such was the substance of Mr. Serchal's soliloquy, when the object of it, Mrs. Rigors, came sailing down the oak staircase, with some gay ribbons pinned jauntily at the back of her head, and a tray daintily tricked out with fine linen and silver, in her hands.

"Your lady's *not* coming down to breakfast, then, this morning. Master's just sent to inquire."

"Oh! we are very kind and attentive when it suits our convenience, I daresay, *Mister* Serschal!" was the waiting-woman's reply, with a stress upon the first syllable of the courtesy title, which would seem to imply some lurking satire in its depths.

"There's very little of the same coin wasted t'other way, I take it—which is scarcely fair, according to my notions at least, Mrs. Rigors."

"Really, Mister Serschal, it's a pity that such notions as yours should be lost to the world. You should have them put in the papers—they'd make a stir!"

"Tongues is sharp enough in some neighbourhoods, ma'am—it's a pity that wits ain't even. One's vinegar, t'other's sauce—there's a sight of difference between the two."

"Your language, like your ideas, is low, Mr. Serschal. Perhaps, when you feel that way disposed, you'll allow me to pass."

"With all the pleasure in life. You're

to bring down the key of the post-bag, if your lady breakfasts up—that's my orders, leastways."

"Whose orders, pray?"

"My *young* mistress's."

"I take no orders from any one but *my* lady in this house."

"Times is changed, Mrs. Rigors."

"Times *are* changed, Mr. Serschal."

"But I'll tell *you* what, ma'am," said the old henchman, who was working himself into a rage—"I'll tell you what, it's a great pity that my mistress did not take and put yours out of the house by the shoulders, before things came to the pass they did. I know who'd have given a help-hand there, and I leave you to guess which way, ma'am."

Here a sharp peal of the breakfast-room bell interrupted the belligerent parties, who never lost an opportunity of snarling at each other like dog and cat; to which latter animal, indeed, Mrs. Rigors bore a striking resemblance—you could never quite forget the existence of the claws, even when she

purred the most contentedly, and fawned the most obsequiously.

She ruled at Marchmont with an iron rule; and very few of the old servants remained to be tyrannized over. Mrs. Minching had fulfilled her threat, and left the situation which she had occupied for more than twenty years in Mr. Marchmont's family; but Mr. Serschal, the butler, and Lucy, the lady's-maid, remained, induced, it was believed, to do so by the attachment which they bore to their young mistress. As the first named waddled panting back to the breakfast-room, he encountered an angry glance from a quarter in which he seldom experienced it.

"Have you sent for the key?" Miss Marchmont demanded, in authoritative accents, her eyes flashing and annoyance expressed in every tone, for her patience had been sorely tried.

"I met Mrs. Rigors on the stairs, Miss Bessie, coming for her lady's breakfast; she said she could take no orders in this house from any one but her own mistress, so there

was not much use a-speaking, as I saw."

"Will you allow this, papa?"

Bessie asked the question just as Mrs. Rigors entered the room, strong and imperturbed, and began to arrange various delicacies upon her tray, in which occupation the Squire himself fussily assisted—perhaps to evade an answer to the home question which his daughter had just addressed to him.

"An egg do you think your mistress will take? or a slice of cold chicken or ham? The coffee is cold, I should advise cocoa. Bessie, my dear, pour out a cup of cocoa, will you, it is out of my reach?"

"I asked you a question, papa, and shall be glad if you will answer it yes, or no. Will you allow any servant in this house to send an impertinent message to me?"

"Certainly not."

The answer was accompanied, however, by a lowering frown, indicative of a coming storm. There was nothing the Squire hated so much as a scene of which he himself was not the originator; and true to his nature,

he only abnegated his own authority in favour of the one who had the greatest power over his individual comfort—not to call it happiness—and who held the keys of his domestic peace in her hands.

"I have just received one, and it is a thing that I will not put up with; therefore, papa, I must beg of you to interfere."

"No one wishes you to put up with anything, my dear, as far as I am aware. Do let us have breakfast in peace. Take up the post-bag to your mistress, and ask her to open it, and to send it down again at once," the Squire added nervously, and as though anxious to put an end to further contention on the subject.

"It is well to let the servants see we are afraid of them," said Bessie, loud enough for Mrs. Rigors to hear as she left the room. It was a barbed arrow, and it was intended as such. If there was one thing more than another upon which the Squire prided himself—or, to speak more correctly, upon which he had once prided himself—it was that he was *master in his own house.*

"You forget yourself strangely," was his reply to his daughter's remark; for discord and cavil, and carping, now reigned supreme at Marchmont, and scarcely a day passed without some such scene as I have described taking place.

If Mrs. Marchmont herself had been present, the arrows would have flown faster and thicker and been launched with a deadlier aim, for she was a mistress in the art of retaliation as well as of attack.

Meanwhile Mrs. Rigors carried upstairs the object of all the contention—the heavy leathern post-bag, which seemed to be quite full, amongst the delicate breakfast equipage. It was an object on which Mrs. Marchmont's eye rested eagerly as she rose from her pillows with more *empressement* than might have been looked for in an invalid.

"Give me the key at once—it is on my watch-chain—make haste," she added feverishly; and her white and well-shaped, but decidedly large and over-ringed hand shook visibly as she extracted the contents of the

bag. "Here is the one I expected from Bertie," she said, dealing out the letters as she spoke like cards, but retaining one—the one she commented on thus—in her hand—"three for the Squire—another for me—all the rest for me. You may take these down at once, the Squire will be wanting his *Times*."

A deep flush suffused Mrs. Marchmont's naturally impassible features, as she clasped her own letters almost nervously in her hand.

"What a chance!" she exclaimed aloud, as she heard the retreating footsteps of Mrs. Rigors down the long corridor, and rising hastily from the bed, she thrust one of the letters she held into the pocket of her dressing-case; it had evidently caused some strong emotion in her mind, for she panted, and her heart beat audibly as she threw herself back amongst the pillows again.

Bertie's letter was evidently of secondary importance, for she had eaten an egg and the greater part of a slice of ham before she bestowed a thought on it. When at last she

opened it, she read the contents with surprise, not unmixed with annoyance.

"Coming to-day," she muttered to herself, "before events are properly ripe. The Squire hates being taken unawares, too; but Bertie would spoil the best cards that ever fell into a player's hands. I believe if he were dealt a hand of trumps he would manage to lose the odd trick."

Life appears under this aspect to the natures which are adventurers at heart. It is a game—a game in which some must win and others lose. It is the *play* which is the excitement, and when the true gamester has won the highest stak, ehe feels the keenest relish in risking it all upon a single throw.

Mrs. Marchmont had won a higher stake than she had dared to hope for, but she had no intention of throwing up her cards—she was still gazing eagerly for the adversary's next lead. She nourished an eager passionate desire to see accomplished a match between Bessie and her own son.

"It would strengthen the connection," she repeated over and over again to herself,

"and keep the property in the family in any case."

She wished to make an irreparable breach between her step-daughter and Reginald Kingdom; and the thought once conceived within the chambers of her plotting brain, she gave herself up to the achievement of her evil design. It became, like all evil thoughts, a separate life, over which its author had the same amount of control that a parent possesses over the physical organization of a week-old child. It became a being, a force, an identity, possessing the life-giving or multiplying faculty. It could never return to space.

Annihilation is a word unrecognized in the law of nature. The laws of metaphysics are more subtle, but not less clearly defined. The doctrine of the immortality of the soul is the doctrine of the indestructability of human thought—whether for evil or for good, the life is for ever and for ever; the pulses of the universe must cease to beat before that life can be as though it had never been. What an awful aspect this gives to

the fact which often appears so harmless to the lookers on, of gambling not only with our own destinies, but staking those of others upon our reckless throws! Thought is in this instance the parent of strategy, and machination the offspring of both.

Mrs. Marchmont was a keen reader of one side of human nature—the weak side—and she was clever enough, as we have already seen, to turn this gift to account. She was annoyed by the letter which she had received that morning from her son, because she believed that his sudden advent at Marchmont, on his first visit since she had been mistress there, was a false move. If it had not been, she argued with herself, for the fortunate accident which put that letter into my hands this morning, it would have been a fatal move.

Meanwhile the letters had been carried back into the breakfast-room; and Mr. Serschal, ofter delivering those directed to the Squire, with the papers, made no divergence in the direction of his young mistress, who occupied a solitary position on one side of the table.

"None for me?" she asked, while her lips whitened and trembled in the tender corners of them: she seemed to suppress with difficulty an exclamation of disappointment.

"No, Miss Bessie, those are all."

CHAPTER III.

"Heaven first sent letters for some wretches' aid,
Some banished lover, or some captive maid—
They live, they breathe, they speak what love inspires
Fresh from the soul, and faithful to its fires;—
The maiden's wish without her fears impart,
Excuse the blush, and pour out all the heart."

POPE.

"THOSE were all." And Bessie's heart had gone out to meet one which should have arrived that morning to seal her future fate.

After spending a solitary hour in her own room, the natural restlessness of youth came over her, and she determined upon going over to the Hermitage and giving "Joey" his reading-lesson—a task which at her own request had devolved upon her. The word "unkind" seemed to be written on the poor

girl's heart with a pen of steel, and to speak from the depths of her appealing eyes.

But Reggie had not been unkind. The fate which was so remorselessly quenching Bessie's fondest hopes and affections was no *blind* one. It assumed the shape in this instance of the white warm fingers of a woman's hand, acting under the influence of an evil thought, which has penetrated a human brain.

Bessie's expected letter, which had an Irish post-mark, was the one which Mrs. Marchmont had retained in her hand as she counted down the others without any variation in the tones of her voice with each successive "this one for me." She had soon afterwards quietly perused it, lying warm and easy in bed, having instructed Mrs. Rigors to allow no one to disturb her for an hour. It will be no treason in such a case to transcribe the contents :—

"Words cannot describe what I felt, my darling Bessie, when your precious letter was put into my hand this morning. I

kissed it before I read it, and after reading it you may imagine I kissed it again a hundred times—such a letter as that is the turning point of a man's life. I only feel that I am *too* happy—I have not deserved so much. You lament for my sake the change in your position, but I could bless the fate that has made you open your heart to me; but, at the same time, I can well imagine how galling to a certain proud little heart are the frictions of every-day life with a nature vulgar at the core. I respond heartily to those gushing little dashes under the sentence, '*I hate her.*' So do I, darling, from my soul; but still she has given you to me. She has been the cause of my receiving those precious words, which will lie on my heart until I can clasp in mine the little fingers which traced them, *never* to let them go again. I am writing to my mother —*our* mother, I might say now—but as you bade me, I kept silence—I did not even mention your name, because I could not do so without betraying your secret. How it will rejoice her warm, good heart, and my

father's, for he loves you too, Bessie—who, indeed, could know you as they do and do otherwise? How brave you are to risk the appearance of *this* at the family breakfast-table!—but it is like you to tolerate nothing underhand. Perhaps the she Philistine will hand it you herself with that large, cruel hand of hers, which I know so well. Give my love to poor Bertie. I have felt deeply for him, for I know that he was dead against the match. He is a true friend to me; be kind to him for my sake. Rufus is well, and makes a splendid charger. My laurels are to win next week—I will not tell you *how* until you tell me I may write again. Give me credit for my obedience, and God bless you, my darling girl, a thousand and a thousand times!

"Your ever devoted

"REGGIE."

This was the letter which Bessie had been expecting, in answer to a few lines she had penned to Reginald, with many a burning blush, to the effect that, owing to her fa-

ther's marriage, she now considered herself free to engage herself to him. She had written thus :—

"I wished you to be free, Reggie, when you left me, and although my own heart was bleeding all the time, I would not form an engagement unknown to papa. Now things are so strangely altered, and he has behaved so unfeelingly to me in the matter of this hateful marriage, it shall be as you wished, if *you* are still in the same mind. Write to me openly, and I will answer you openly—only don't say anything on the subject to your people until you come home, when you shall claim me if you choose before them all. *I* shall then have nothing to conceal, and I have been taught how to value true love. As to the woman papa has married I can only say *I hate her*, and I consider that in marrying her he has in a great measure cancelled any obligations which were due to him with regard to my own choice. I shall expect your answer by return of post—after that please don't write

again until you hear from me. *She* opens the post-bag now. I shall receive your letter from her hand. I am not very happy, as you may imagine.

"BESSIE."

This letter had been left amongst others for the post on the hall-table, directed in clear open characters to the remote Irish town in which the dragoon regiment to which Reginald Kingdom belonged was then quartered. To say that it was "Ballysomething" or other, will perhaps suffice. This letter was not even sealed with wax, but gummed down in an envelope which had the letters of Bessie's name curiously intertwined in one of the unreadable monograms which are so fashionable, as the only seal. Mrs. Marchmont, coming down with her own letters, espied this one as it lay amongst the others, distinguished by the delicate tint of the envelope, amongst the blue official-looking documents which had formed the Squire's contribution to the post that day, and which had been placed there

not by himself but by Mr. Serschal the butler, who had been sent to the library to fetch them before the Squire went out riding on the gray cob of happy memory. Mrs. Marchmont hummed an opera air to herself as she turned over the letters, and examined the directions of each. With a sudden impulse she had slipped that one into her apron pocket and retired with it to her own room. Whether that letter was tampered with before it was replaced is a question which the reader will be left to answer for himself; he has already seen the fate of the answer, which was never destined to reach the hand for which it was intended.

"She hates me, does she? I will give her cause," Mrs. Marchmont whispered to herself, as she crushed the thin sheets of Reginald's letter in her hands; and having rolled it into a ball she threw it into the fire which had just been lighted in the grate—for the crisp September mornings were chilly, and Mrs. Marchmont hated cold. "She hates me, does she? And her empty-pated coxcomb of a lover calls me 'vulgar

at the core.' They shall live to feel that I can sting. I have the game in my own hands."

And she watched with satisfaction the little ball of crumpled paper consume within the flame and resolve itself into a heap of blue ashes, which would scarcely have covered a five-shilling piece. Yet Bessie's happiness lay within that small circumference, whilst her own heart, on which it would have lain so lovingly, was beating itself like a wounded bird against the bars of its prison.

She was gone to the Hermitage to give Joey his lesson. The boy's devotion to her was very great, and the following conversation with regard to him took place between Bessie and the Colonel, who did not always quite agree as to the training of the young idea in Joey's case.

"He is a strange lad," the Colonel observed on this occasion. "I do not think that he will ever be made to see the difference between right and wrong."

"I am not sure that that is a peculiarity

on his part. There are two sides to right, and two sides to wrong, it appears to me."

"But the wrong side of right, is better than the right side of wrong. There is a quibble for you, child, such as you love."

"I can't say that, Uncle Rex; and as for poor Joey, how can he be supposed to know."

"Poor Joey indeed! He is the luckiest little 'vagabone' I know. Can't you teach him, Bessie?"

"I?"

"You."

"No, Uncle Rex, not I. I don't believe Joey would touch a thing that does not belong to him. Even with his bringing up he is incapable of a theft."

"So I believe; and yet he does not hesitate to tell an untruth if it suits his convenience. I detected him in one to-day; but I failed to make him in the least ashamed of it, until I threatened to inform you."

"Do not make me his conscience-keeper, pray; I have enough to do to look

after my own. Poor Joey loves me, although he does not discriminate between right and wrong. Perhaps, like me, he has 'no common sense.'"

Bessie was quoting from Mrs. Marchmont, who was apt to make this remark of her step-daughter behind her back; of which fact the latter had of course been duly informed by a mutual *friend*! She felt it to be true, and therefore deeply resented it. The childish element was not extinguished within her, and although her intellectual gifts were far above the average, in the giving and taking part of her nature, which we call the human part, she was a very child, with a child's eager impulse, a child's yearning affections, a child's passionate resentment of injury or injustice. Common sense is the faculty which reduces all life's questions to the mere practical bearing; and of this quality Bessie possessed but a small share. She made her feelings her guides, counsellors, friends on every occasion involving promptitude of action or decision of thought.

Such a nature is held more or less in

scorn by those to whom the source of the fountain is a sealed spring. "They are dangerous guides, the feelings," is the sense of their comment upon actions to which their own impassible temperaments afford no clue.

Bessie, on the contrary, seldom failed to act upon impulse; no one could have calculated beforehand the line of conduct which, under certain circumstances, she would adopt; and with a very delicate and sensitive organization and temperament, she often bitterly repented having yielded to the promptings of some passing impulse, which she had been unable at the time to resist.

Like touching an open wound to her it was then, to recur in thought to the letter —the fatal letter, as she now mentally called it—which she had written during a burst of passionate anguish to the man she loved. He despises me! she thought, and with a self-tormenting conscience which dyed her cheeks with a hot flush, she fretted herself sick with the idea that she had committed a flagrant breach of decorum in writing at all.

"If he had only sent me one line—one word!" she repeated to herself over and over again, as she hastened home from the Hermitage in time to dress for dinner; "but he shall not find me so tame a prize. I know how to resent a slight like this—that is if he should not write, which indeed I can hardly believe."

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CHAPTER IV.

"A genuine virtue of a vigorous kind,
Pure in the last recesses of the mind."
DRYDEN.

IT was with this sentiment breathing from her face, flashing from the depths of her beautiful eyes, and mounting in carnation hues her fair youthful cheek, that she entered the drawing-room a minute or so before the announcement of dinner, and met a not altogether unfamiliar form face to face.

Bertie had just arrived, and had crossed the threshold of the Hall, for the first time since his mother had been the mistress there. He had not, indeed, appeared in any haste to take advantage of the position which she considered so desirable.

"How do you do, Miss Marchmont?" on his part; a smile and an extended hand on hers was the greeting exchanged between these two—brother and sister in a certain sense; but Bessie flushed a rosier red than she had been before, and Bertie's features were quite redeemed from the imputation of plainness by the strong and earnest intelligence of their expression, and by the manly tenderness which shone in his eyes. Bessie had made up her mind to detest him, but that feeling gave way to pity as she detected a trace of pain in his face, foreign to the genial happy expression natural to it, and she held out her hand more cordially than she believed she could have done to his mother's son. As their hands met for the first time since the—to both—unwelcome relationship, he said in the low tone of a singularly pleasant voice,

"Can you forgive me for coming on such short notice? Sometimes even an unwelcome surprise is better than an anticipated evil."

Bessie said something about being very

glad to see him; but not with her usual happy grace of manner. She had never been sufficiently interested in the young man to discover that his nature, like her own, had its depths, with this difference—his impulses were under a stronger control.

"I fear you can hardly be that," he replied, to the conventional greeting which her words implied. "I know what you must feel my presence here to be—that of an intruder in your home. Will you excuse my dress, my portmanteau has not yet arrived?" he asked her deferentially, and with studied courtesy, as though she were still the young and happy hostess, and he a casual guest.

"Certainly," she answered, bowing her pretty head with natural grace; "but it is not for *me* to excuse now."

It was indeed very cruel, but she had been sorely tried and hurt by the indifference of the man she loved, and who was far away; so, woman-like, she revenged herself on the man in her presence, and in her power—a thing of flesh and blood, that she

could prick to the heart with a word or with a look. She had pricked him to the quick, she felt, and he turned from her and left the room without another word.

"How wicked I am," she said to herself, sorely repenting her remorseless speech when it was too late; "poor fellow, it was not his fault."

She indeed little knew the sacrifice of his own inclinations it had cost him to come to Marchmont at all. He had done so solely because his friend Reginald had asked him to do so in so many off-hand words.

"Do go down to Marchmont, old fellow, and cheer up Bessie a little—my mother tells me that she gets sadly moped."

"He does not know what he is asking," thought the man to whom the request was made; and it is possible that his own secret had been unsuspected by his friend. However that might have been, with the generous self-forgetfulness so natural to him that it failed to strike those most intimate with him as unselfish at all, he at once determined on his course. He would go down

to Marchmont with a view of winning that sisterly sort of regard from the woman he loved, which is more hopeless than positive dislike or even hatred. It is safe to "begin with a little aversion," as Mrs. Malaprop has it; but a lukewarm sort of regard, grounded upon esteem, is cold, very cold comfort to a man in love, for the first, and perhaps the only, time in his life. He had taken up the pen that he had put down wet when his friend's letter was handed to him—the pen that had been so busy all the morning covering sheet after sheet of foolscap with the fruits of his aching brain, and had written a few lines to his mother, announcing his intended visit. Then he tossed away the instrument of the toil that had become so dear to him, and said bitterly, "I have done with *you!*"

It had been his companion and solace through many a weary hour, when he dared not turn his eyes inwards into his own breast—when the fierce mechanical action of the brain sought an outlet in the mechanical action of the ready hand—when

work came to him as sleep to the drunkard, with oblivion on its heavy wing.

If Bessie could have witnessed the action and the sting of pain that writhed his features as she said the words, she would have spared him the bitter taunt. It was too late, however, to repent—the dart had been dealt with a true aim, and it was to little purpose then to faint at the sight of the blood.

CHAPTER V.

In aught that tries the heart, how few withstand the proof.
Childe Harold.

MRS. MARCHMONT kept a lynx-eyed watch over her step-daughter for some days. There was not much difference, however, in her outward bearing; and as day after day passed, and the expected letter came not, there grew up in her heart a feeling of bitter resentment towards the man who had slighted her, and who had treated her letter with such contempt. Bertie's quiet deferential manner soothed her to a certain extent, but his mother had been in a mood since his arrival which tried her to the utmost.

Mrs. Marchmont could say very bitter things if she liked, and although Bessie had

made a mental resolution not to be betrayed into a war of words with her, sometimes the temptation became too great, to retaliate in her own coin.

On one occasion of the kind Bessie, looking up suddenly from her work, met a pair of grave, honest eyes, fixed so sadly, so appealingly on her face, that she blushed, and her eyes fell under his gaze. There had sprung up a barrier of reserve between them, built up upon the taunt with which Bessie had greeted his first attempt to establish a more friendly footing, and she had deeply reproached herself for it since. She determined upon making the *amende honourable*, and during the short transit between the dining and drawing-rooms, as he took her in to dinner, she said, in more friendly, interested accents than any in which she had as yet addressed him,

"Have you had good sport to-day?"

"Tolerable," was the reply; but it became evident that the tone of the question had affected him more than the matter of it, for upon the Squire turning round to ask

him what covers he had shot, he was obliged to own in some confusion that he had not taken out a gun.

"How idle you are, my dear!" drawled Mrs. Marchmont, affectedly—"we are in want of game for the house, and you may as well shoot it as Johnson."

Bertie coloured deeply—he always did when his mother paraded the authority which it always appeared to him that she had usurped in that house. He answered somewhat shortly—

"Johnson is more efficient than I am. I do not care about shooting this season."

Bessie noted the remark, and, I had almost said, loved the speaker for it; for Bertie was a keen and eager sportsman, but he was recalling, she well knew, the happy shooting of those same covers the autumn before. She looked across the table at him with a beaming smile. Her step-mother saw the smile, and her heart bounded eagerly under her impassible exterior.

"Let things take their course," she said calmly to herself, ignoring, and choosing to

ignore, the disgraceful action which it has been my unpleasant task to record, which had thrown Bessie's happiness off the line.

An idea had flashed across the mind of the latter. Might not Bertie be the chosen vehicle to convey some message from Reginald to herself? He might have received a letter in town the day before his own reached Marchmont, announcing his sudden and unexpected arrival. It was just possible that he had some particular motive for coming which she had afforded him no opportunity of communicating to her.

"I will have a quiet talk with him after dinner," she thought, "and find out."

The most hateful hour of the day to Bessie was that which common civility required that she should spend alone with her stepmother after dinner.

The Squire was old-fashioned enough to sit some time over his bottle of port, a custom quaintly commented on by the late Emperor Maximilian in the "Recollections of my Travels," which shows the light in which foreigners view the voluntary absen-

teeism of the ladies from the society of their lords, at that period of the banquet either on public or private occasions.

"After the toasts," he writes, "the ladies left the table to await the arrival of the gentlemen in the saloon, who still comfortably gave themselves up to wine and conversation. It seems strange when the ladies, *at the desire of the gentlemen*, humbly march away from the table. Many blame this habit as barbarous; I like it."

How truly German is this remark, and the *motive* attributed to the ladies for their withdrawal. The haughty Vashti refused to be present at the time when the gentlemen of her husband's court yielded to the allurements of "wine and conversation;" but her refusal was not attributed by them to an overweening humility on her part.

As they left the room together, the elder woman would sometimes place her jewelled hand playfully and caressingly on the arm of the girl. She did so in this instance, after patting her elderly bridegroom's cheek as she passed him, telling him, in tones affected-

ly coaxing, "like a dear old thing, not to be too long."

The familiar expression of "poor papa" was not, it is true, so often on Bessie's lips as of old, but the meaning of it sunk down deep into her heart as she witnessed his degradation, and his daily increasing supineness to this woman's will.

The confidence which she had once, in an unguarded moment, been tempted to make to Mrs. Duberry, who as Mrs. Marchmont had so cruelly betrayed it, the reader will perhaps remember, when she had more than hinted at the tacit understanding which then existed between herself and Reginald.

The remembrance of this was now a rankling sting in her breast, as she was ever hotly conscious of the fact that her enemy was in possession of the silent if not secret bearing of her heart; and she felt to the quick that a certain speech of her stepmother's had been intended for her enlightenment and edification, which had reference to the ambitious views of her lover respecting the attainment of wealth and position

either by marriage or "any other way," Bertie, Reginald's friend, being quoted as the originator of the remark.

Bessie had heeded it but little at the time it was uttered; but in the self-torturing examination of her own heart which had ensued upon his disregard of her letter, the question would intrude itself, "Does he care for me less because I am not now mistress of Marchmont?" She indeed dwelt bitterly upon her present deposition from her place of honour, never, however, dwelling even in thought on that other contingency which would deprive her of all right to the title of the Marchmont "heiress."

Bertie on the evening in question soon interrupted the tête-à-tête, and added one more to the number of the obligations which he was now heaping upon her head.

"I was wishing for you," she said as he approached her, "to hold this skein of silk for me; it is full of knots and tangles, and altogether unmanageable."

He advanced obediently, trying to still the throbbings of his rebellious heart. Was

he a brother?—or was he not? to this beautiful bewitching creature, who thus invited him, like a mermaid, to his doom. "A brother, of course," conscience whispered; but there was no answering becalmment of the alien blood, which accepted no such affinity, and which disclaimed the title of such close relationship with scorn. No relation—a step-mother's son by a former marriage. The two were as widely separated by the ties of blood, and perhaps more widely with regard to those of natural affection and sympathy, than if their respective parents had never met. Connection-ship is the last light in which any one would wish to be placed, in order to inspire interest or a tenderer sentiment in the object beloved. A connection generally indulges in the irritating propensity for studying the reverse of your character. The wrong side of the fabric, with all the odds and ends sticking out uneven and jagged, and he studies them with a critical eye.

It has been well observed that a relation may abuse you himself, but will allow no

one else to do so; but that a flaw in your character immediately becomes public in the mouth of the connection, to whom belongs essentially the familiarity which breeds contempt. Certainly the fact least in Bertie's favour, as regarded Miss Marchmont's appreciation of his many good and fine qualities, was that his mother now lounged in the corner of the sofa where she had once held her own little court. We have heard Bessie once in a pet describe him as "that long-legged son of hers," even when the widow's influence over the Squire was only commencing; her marriage was not likely to establish matters on a friendlier footing.

Bertie had indeed been more deferential and formal in manner to her than he had been when they were all merry together the autumn before. He had not even ventured to address her by her Christian name; and Bessie liked him the better for his forbearance.

The skein of knitting-silk proved a refractory one, and the little white hands flitted

in and about it like flower petals blown by the wind.

"It is a hard skein," she said at last, for the silence maintained was becoming irksome to one at least of the parties concerned.

"I think if you put it through once or twice more, you will find it wind off easily."

"But I have put it through so many times, and it seems to get worse and worse. Look here, Mr. Duberry."

He coloured at the formal address, but only shook his head in reply, as she held up a tangled mass which had never been passed over his hands at all, and which seemed likely to offer a more obstinate resistance than had yet been encountered to the smooth running of the strand of silk.

"I think it is hopeless—I had better cut it."

"No, don't do that—a little patience, and you will save a knot."

"I have not much patience—I never had; and it is not a quality which increases with age."

"You speak from experience, of course?"

"I do indeed—I feel to be getting very old."

"Since when?"

"Since yesterday, I think," Bessie answered with a smile more like one of her old smiles than any Bertie had noticed since he came down to Marchmont under existing circumstances. It encouraged him to break the ice of reserve which had prevented him from fulfilling his mission there, and he said in low tones, and bending his head nearer to her as he spoke,

"You think I do not know how you must hate me. I am in a false position here, as you hinted when I first came; but I did not come for my own sake—I had rather never have seen you again than have done that. You need not shrink from me, Bessie, I am not going to make love to you for myself."

There was a mournful tenderness in the ring of his voice—the richly-tuned voice that might have exercised a subtle influence

over many a less susceptible ear than the one on which it fell. The tears gathered in Bessie's eyes, for the key to that proud tender heart had been put into her hand. Bertie too loved her, and she knew it for the first time.

"I did not shrink from you, *Bertie*," she answered, with a faltering voice, for she was deeply touched. "I was not likely to shrink from so dear a friend."

"Do not be tender with me—I cannot afford *that*," was the reply, as a deadly paleness spread itself over his features. "You understand me, that is enough. I heard from Kingdom the other day."

"Did he tell you—did he tell you that I had written to him?" it was on her lips to say, but her tongue refused to utter the words which resolved themselves into the common-place remark, "How he was getting on." And she added, "Which day did you say you heard from him?"

"The day before I came here," he replied; and a sudden impulse moved him to say, "you shall see the letter if you like;" but

he remembered in time that there were one or two sentences in it with regard to Bessie (it had been written before the girl's letter had reached Reginald), in rather too off-hand a strain, not to have proved very disillusory to a temperament like hers; and he refrained from exhibiting the least favourable side of his friend's character in the eyes of one whom he himself passionately loved.

She marked his hesitation, and attributed it to the wrong cause—that Reginald had betrayed her confidence, and had told his friend she had written, and of his own contempt. The suspicion aroused the pride that love had for a space laid aside, and assuming a cold and almost repellent demeanour, she observed,

"I must give up the idea of ever getting to the end of this. I really cannot trouble you to hold it any longer."

"It is no trouble; but if it has exhausted your patience I will have a try. I used to be a good hand at unravelling knots."

He took the ball from her unresisting hand, and he could not help observing, in

the momentary contact, that it was as cold as ice, although the room was almost oppressively warm, and a regular winter fire burning in the grate.

"How cold you are," he remarked. "Are you well?"

"Yes, perfectly, my hands are always cold. You know the old proverb, 'a cold hand and a warm heart.' Sometimes I feel to want some one to speak to not a hundred years old—that is all. Thank you for coming; it has done me good."

The young girl heaved a sigh as she spoke, but it was a sigh of relief, and Bertie felt in some measure repaid for the generous sacrifice of his own feelings he had made for Reginald's sake and hers.

"Please think of me always as a friend, Bessie—as an elder brother, if you like. I will never fail you, for I can never forget how much you have to forgive, not *me*, but mine."

"Do not think me so ungenerous, so resentful, Bertie. At least I have gained a brother, and for that I say God bless you with all my heart!"

Then she turned upon him a look of eager questioning appeal, which had the sole effect of puzzling him. He had not the solution of the problem in his keeping, which the little heap of blue ashes in Mrs. Marchmont's grate, long since swept away, could alone have afforded. Disappointed and sick at heart, the poor girl was thus forced to relinquish her last hope.

CHAPTER VI.

"The time was that I hated thee—
And yet, it is not that I bear thee love.
Thy company, which erst was irksome to me,
I will endure—
But do not look for further recompense."

As you Like it.

MRS. MARCHMONT had a secret in her own breast which, knowing her as we do, we might well have imagined to be attended with the sweetest feelings of satisfaction on her part. But it was not so; it was a secret the contemplation of which she avoided even in her own thoughts, for it was one which brought a nameless terror with it, and she was a coward at heart. It was a secret which many of those who surrounded her were already beginning to guess. But those principally concerned

were innocent of all suspicion in the matter. It was a subject on which even the privileged Mrs. Rigors was peremptorily silenced, for she would gladly have proclaimed it on the housetops, could she have found listeners there, or if her tongue had not been tied in the only way that operation was ever effected, namely, by heavy bribes.

Eschewing all mystery, however, the fact may be simply stated that the contingency mentioned in the settlements was likely to occur, and that it was more than possible that Bessie would be really ousted from the position she had maintained so long, and from the inheritance which she had learned to prize.

But the prospect of this crowning triumph on the part of one who had earned the right to be called the girl's worst enemy, brought its own Nemesis. Mrs. Marchmont became a prey to the most distressing nervous depression on that subject, and the slightest hint on the part of her maid, who had caught a shade of her own anxiety, paled her cheek and paralyzed her tongue. A gipsy had

once told her fortune, and had given a vague sketch of her future such as it had afterwards proved; but across her palm, just where the zenith of fortune was indicated, the ill-omened prophetess had detected a strong cross line.

"Danger, and perhaps death, would meet her face to face at this turn;" and the random words of the swarthy Bohemian returned to her mind, rapidly becoming morbid under the influence of weak physical health, and had assumed almost the form of monomania on that one particular point.

Her temper, as may be believed, suffered from the self-imposed reticence and concealment of suffering, and the Squire lapsed daily into more senile helplessness, and more entire submission to her domineering will. Bessie was scornful, and Bertie silent, but he bit his lips nearly through when any domestic scene of an unpleasant nature took place.

"Mother," he said one day to her, when they were alone, "this is enough to weary a fellow of his life."

"What is enough, most dutiful of sons? The opportunity you have for passing away your time, and eating the bread of idleness in my house, and of making love to a doll-faced girl, whom you have not the spirit to make love *you* in return? I do not know what hardships you can complain of having to endure at Marchmont."

"You have a way of saying cruel things, mother, which you seem to have learnt at Marchmont. Would to God I had never seen the place, or anything belonging to it —it would have been all the better for me."

"How very stagey and melo-dramatic we are becoming! The Squire should see you thus—he complains that you never speak."

"I have nothing to do with him, or he with me, as far as that goes. *I* am under no obligations to Squire Marchmont."

"Excepting the simple one of being a guest under his roof for the time being. As to the duty and affection you owe to your mother, those considerations are easily waived."

"On both sides?"

"I do not say so. I was rash enough once to disobey you, and you have never forgiven me—that is all."

"Do not let us enter upon that topic, mother—it is not one that can now be discussed with any delicacy between us."

"There are other topics more interesting to you, I have no doubt. May I be permitted to ask you how long this folly is to go on?"

"What folly?"

"This egregious, Quixotic folly of making love by proxy to one who has evidently no intention of making love for himself. Reginald has evidently thrown Bessie over since——"

"Since what?"

"Since the change in her present position and possible prospects. She has written to him, I happen to know; and *I also know that she has received no answer.* If she thinks to hoodwink *me* she is very much deceived."

"If she *has* written, there is no doubt

but that by this time she has received an answer. Kingdom is very much in love."

"*Was* very much, you mean. I will lay you anything you please that she has not heard from him. Don't you see that she is fretting herself ill?"

"He would not be such a rascal. How long is it since she wrote, and how do you know that she did write, mother?"

"I saw the letter on the hall table amongst others for the post."

"It was most probably an answer. She is constantly at the Rectory—nothing could be easier than for them to communicate privately, if she wished it."

"I do not know that. Kingdom *mère* has her principles, and I do not imagine she would countenance anything clandestine."

"I think you jump at conclusions."

"I think otherwise. I have good reasons for what I say. Depend on it, Bertie, she will never be better inclined to listen to you than at this moment. Take the golden opportunity, if you are a man, while she is smarting from a recent slight. Foolish boy,

do you think that I do not read your secret like the page of an open book?"

"It is a matter of indifference to me who reads my secret. But no one—not even you, mother—must venture to impugn my honour."

"Impugn your fiddle-stick! Honour is not implicated in an affair of a little harmless exchange of sentiment between a young man and a pretty girl. Do you imagine that Reginald has not flirted with all the pretty girls in Dublin by this time?—or that he would have been equally complaisant to you under similar circumstances? Not he!"

"That is no affair of mine."

"And this is no affair of his. If you had a particle of spirit you would go in for the prize, and win it. Take my advice for once, and remember that her father will never *hear* of anything in the other quarter. If you persist in your present line of conduct you will be encouraging a clandestine love affair, which has, moreover, the double disadvantage of being entirely on one side."

"That is a view of the question which I utterly disallow; and as to the Squire's prejudices, I deny his right, or the right of any parent, to destroy a child's happiness. If Bessie is thwarted in her affections, she will break her heart!"

"Young people do not die of that complaint now-a-days. Perhaps the best thing that could have happened was for Reginald to act as he has done. Wounded pride is the best plaister for 'a broken heart.'"

"I do not believe him capable of it. I have, indeed, proof to the contrary."

"What proof, I should like to know?"

Mrs. Marchmont's curiosity was excited. She was dying to know whether her machinations had been altogether successful. It was just possible that her step-daughter might have received an intimation from some other quarter—that a letter had been written which had never reached its destination.

She had, it is true, received from the letter she had destroyed the comforting assurance that Mrs. Kingdom was to know no-

thing of the new relations established between Bessie and her son, until informed of the circumstance by the former herself. But it was possible that Reginald might have said something to Bertie, who would not have failed to repeat it to Bessie, on the Quixotic principle she so much reprobated.

"I heard from him the other day, and he mentioned her in terms of the warmest interest. Indeed, it was at his instigation that I came down here at all."

Mrs. Marchmont laughed aloud—and her laugh was not a pleasant one.

"My dear," she said as soon as she had recovered breath, "with all your sense and clear-headedness, you are the most arrant goose where your own interests are concerned! I do not think Reginald quite a fool, and I see his game. Weary of the affair himself, he would gladly transfer it to the shoulders of his friend."

"You see too far into a mill-stone, mother. Your theory is too ingenious to be true. Men are not so ready to see possible rivals even in their best friends. As to being

weary of 'the affair,' as you call it, that is a mistake. Kingdom is as much in love as ever, and he has a good excuse."

"Of course, as a gentleman and a would-be rival, you could not say less. I do not see much in the girl myself. She is wilful and wayward, like other spoilt children. She would be miserable as Reginald's wife, who is too much in love with himself ever to make an attentive husband. He would treat her as a mere puppet before the honeymoon was well over."

At this moment the butler entered the room with a message to Mr. Duberry, to the effect that the horses were coming round, and that Miss Marchmont was ready to ride.

As he was about to obey the summons, which in other circumstances would have proved such a welcome one, his mother fired at him a parting shot.

"Well, Bertie, if you cannot play the cards you hold in your hands now, I give you up. I shall think you a greater fool than I took you for, if you do not make the most of your opportunity."

"*Are* the cards in my hands?" was the question which flashed into the young man's mind as he put Bessie on her horse. Eve could not have put temptation in the form of an apple more forcibly before Adam than his own mother had put it before him, in these words.

Every day passed in the society of the young girl only made the *rôle* which he had assigned himself a more difficult and a more cruel one to act; and the thought flashed up like fire in his breast to throw the reins to his feelings, and leave it to fate to direct their headlong course.

"Let us have a canter on the High Down," said Bessie. "A ride will do us both good."

"So it will. I was wondering the other day whether you had quite given up riding."

"I do not care much for riding alone, and papa hardly ever rides now. The cob is too fresh for him, and old Marmaduke not very safe."

"You rode in town last season. I used to see you in the Row."

"*You* did?"

"Yes, sometimes when I had an idle hour I walked there for fresh air,"—he did not add, if only to get a glimpse of the fair face which had caused a sensation among *blazé* town dandies and fortune-hunters; and of the beautiful eyes which always seemed to be looking for something beyond their gay *entourage*, and the frequenters of the crowded Row.

Lady Pendragon had willingly undertaken—having no daughter of her own—the task of introducing to the London world her brother's only daughter, and very gratifying would it have proved to her could she have impressed upon Bessie the expediency of a brilliant marriage.

"You must strike while the iron's hot in this sort of thing," she would remark sententiously to her intimate friends. "People may say what they like, but a girl never does go down the second season. Men are so *blazé* now, they like something with the bloom on it; and if the dear girl would only make up her mind she might be most brilliantly settled in life. It is, I assure you,

an affair here of *l'embarras des richesses!*"

But Bessie went through the whole routine, and remained Bessie Marchmont still. The presentation, when the first lady in the land stood in the place where her people loved to see her, giving a tone and a bias even to fashionable society, the standard of which is gradually lowering unrefreshed by that gracious and purifying influence. Here Bessie's sweet, youthful face, more interesting from the shade of sadness that pervaded it, had attracted the attention of Royalty, and a few gracious words to that effect, addressed to the Prince Consort, were overheard by a lady-in-waiting, a relative of Lady Pendragon's, and soon became a by-word in high circles, and made the new beauty an object of interest to many who otherwise might have never heard even her name.

"That is the face which the Queen said at the last drawing-room was the prettiest she had ever seen," was an observation constantly made in the ball-room, at the Opera, and in the Row, where Bessie rode constantly with her uncle, Lord Pendragon,

and it stamped the possessor of it with the prestige of *the* reigning beauty of the season. For in that great vortex, where so many lovely faces must of necessity be overlooked, some such passport to public appreciation is indispensable; and the same rose by any other name in that artificial atmosphere would by no means smell as sweet.

The life was a new and a dazzling one, and under other circumstances Bessie might have been induced to throw her life into the first eligible balances that offered themselves for her acceptance. But she had possessed a talisman in her own breast to guard her from any temptation of the kind. The pulses of her heart had never been stirred by the admiration so lavishly bestowed, excepting when the conviction that it made her more worthy of him sent the blood into her cheek with a momentary flush of pride.

She had returned to Marchmont single-hearted as she had left it. The influences which exercised their power for evil on her character were the ever-recurring frictions of daily life, with a nature not only unsuited,

but in every way antagonistic to her own. The expression she had made use of in her letter to Reginald was not an exaggerated one. She did hate her step-mother, and she did not even try to conceal the feeling under the usual decent veil of conventionalism. But for her son—for Bertie, whom she had once laughed at, she was beginning to feel a very warm regard. His conduct had been so delicate, and his tact so perfect in his very trying position, that with a quick impulsive reaction of feeling she felt herself taking a very perceptible pleasure in his companionship, and derived a comforting re-assurance from his very presence in the room.

No true woman ever discovered such a secret as Bessie had discovered with regard to his feeling towards her without experiencing a very keen sensation of pleasure. She knew now that he loved her, and she knew him also to be "true as steel." She had even gone so far as to acknowledge to herself that if she had not loved another man, or if Bertie had not been his mother's

son, she might in time have been able to return his affection. Not that she had in the least arrived at the stage of giving true judgment as to the comparative merits of the natures of the two men. She would still have laughed at the idea of comparing them, for in her loyal, but blind devotion, she would have placed Reginald far above Bertie in all the qualities that ennoble manhood; although to a dispassionate judge, or even observer, the balance would have weighed low down on the contrary side.

But the remarkable personal beauty of Reginald had had the effect which it generally has upon imaginative feminine temperaments, of impressing the idea of a corresponding beauty of mind; and the most prosaic, common-place character might be clothed in poetry, by the force of that faculty upon which outward beauty, whether in nature or art, acts as a motive power of extraordinary force.

During this digression we might imagine Bessie and her companion to have been riding together over the green sward, soft

and elastic, of the park glades, both thoroughly enjoying the exercise, and the exhilarating air of a crisp October afternoon, when the distant landscape was of a vivid blue, and the bracken glowed in ruddy splendour in the foreground, and on the far hill side.

The park was of wide extent, but Bessie had taken the straightest line across it, in order to get a pure breeze from a wild common, or heath, which bounded it on one side, called the "High Down."

"The horses are always so fresh here," she said, as the brown thoroughbred she rode gave a fling with his heels, and seemed inclined to try whether his fair rider's seat was as perfect as her hand.

But the challenge only had the effect of raising her courage and spirit, and taking her horse firmly in hand, she at the same time administered a sharp stroke of the whip, which caused him first to spring into the air, and then to stretch himself to a gallop across the open common, which was two miles in extent.

"All galloping ground!" Bessie exclaimed, turning to address her companion, who was purposely reining in his own horse, not to excite hers, for he saw that he was pulling hard.

"Take care!" he said presently; "for God's sake take care!"

The warning was given, as warnings are nine cases in ten, when the danger was over. Bessie's horse, alarmed at some object which she had overlooked, had swerved violently to one side, and for an instant her balance had been unsettled.

"It is something in the gorse," she said, and at the same moment there rose from it a figure which she immediately recognised as belonging to her friend Joey; but Bertie, who had never seen the boy, began to rate him soundly for frightening the lady's horse.

"What are you doing there, you lazy vagabond?" he asked angrily; but Bessie laid a restraining hand upon his arm, which was uplifted with a threatening gesture.

"It's Joey," she said, "but what he is

doing here I don't know. Has the Colonel sent you on a message?" she now asked the boy, who appeared scared and confused.

"No," he replied readily, "the 'Cunnell' did not send me, but the housekeeper did, for eggs from the Manor Farm."

"I hope that is the truth, Joey," Miss Marchmont observed, with an assumed severity, which had the effect of imposing, at least, upon Joey, for without another word either of explanation or defence, he took to his heels and ran away.

"What an extraordinary countenance that boy has! Is he the protegé and pupil, Bessie, of whom I have heard so much?"

"Yes, he is; but you saw him under very unfavourable auspices. He has been up to some mischief, I fancy; the old gipsy propensities break out sometimes, and he is given to play truant; but he is very honest —even the Colonel himself admits that."

"What do you teach him?"

"Only to read and write—the rudiments, in fact. If I had broken my neck, he would have lost a good education," she

added, laughingly. "I thought I was off."

"I am afraid I startled you by doing the worst thing possible to do under the circumstances, calling to you to 'take care.' You were safe in the saddle again fortunately before the words were out of my mouth."

"It would not have made much difference to anyone," the girl replied bitterly—"perhaps Joey would miss me a little," she added, with, I must confess, a certain amount of coquetry instigating the speech. For she well knew that there was one at her side who would willingly have given the price of his own life for hers.

But Bertie's lips were sealed—a great struggle was taking place within his breast. He was balancing the weight of his mother's words, and asking himself the question over again, "Are the cards in my hands, and has Kingdom behaved as she believes? If so, why should I lose my chance of happiness?"

Then one of those sudden impulses came over him, which seem to make us speak or act irrespectively of ourselves—of our better or worse selves, as the case may be. Such

an instinct has caused a miser to bestow unsolicited alms on a beggar in the street—a murderer to betray himself to his pursuers—an honourable man to take a mean advantage of an enemy.

Bertie, obeying it, with a sudden movement dug the spurs into the sides of the spirited animal he rode; and then reining him up sharply, as he sprang in front of Bessie's horse, he laid his hand upon her bridle, and brought him nearly to a stand.

"Bessie," he said almost fiercely, like the wounded animal that turns upon the hand it loves, "there must be an end to this!"

"An end to what?" she asked, alarmed by the strangeness of his manner. "I do not understand you, Bertie."

"An end to my playing the hypocrite down here; if you tempt me with words like those you have just uttered. You *know* that you are everything in the world to me. Do not play a woman's game with me. Do not make it a pastime to prick into the quick—I *beseech* you not!"

"Forgive me," Bessie pleaded humbly,

for the vehemence of the man alarmed her. "I did not mean to wound you. I am not worth your caring for, Bertie—*you do not know how little worth.*"

"It is no business of mine how much or how little—I am only a looker-on," he answered with outward coldness, although there was a very bitter jealousy gnawing at his heart, and the tempter was pleading at his ear. "I am content to be nothing to you but a brother—if you will not put temptation in my way."

"I am sorry that I said anything thoughtlessly that might appear to you in that light. You do not know how unhappy I am, or you would not speak to me unkindly. Bertie—brother if you like, brother if you will —I have been leaning so hard on you; do not desert me as the rest have done."

"Tell me one thing," the young man answered, as he laid his hand, not this time upon her bridle, but upon her arm, and turned in his saddle to gaze into her face. "Are you engaged to Kingdom?—do you

love him? This I think I have a right to know."

"I am not engaged to him. I did love him, God knows how dearly, but that is a thing of the past," Bessie replied, hastily dashing away the tears which wounded pride and affection had gathered under the richly-fringed lids. "Do not press me more; I have answered you as far as I can."

"I am satisfied—I am betraying no trust," he said, relinquishing his grasp of her arm, and riding by her side in, as it seemed to her, a land of dreams. The horses stepped on side by side, noiselessly as stags on the soft green sward moist from recent rains, along a reach of the common which was bordered by covers of stunted oaks, which in their rich russet foliage scented the air with the peculiar fragrance of autumn leaves —faint, aromatic, subtle, exercising a peculiar influence on the appreciative sense.

The sound which the horses' hoofs made, as they left indented prints on the swampy soil, the slight creaking of the saddles, and the music of the champing bits, were the

only sounds which broke the silence maintained between the two for nearly a mile, in which neither seemed inclined to break the rhythm of the movement, or the spell of the engrossing thought.

As they came out into a lane, which led to the village, the clatter of horses' hoofs caused Lancelot, Bessie's horse, to prick his taper ears, and to indulge in a series of gambols, for which she was this time quite prepared. A man mounted on a fast horse wearing blinkers on his bridle rode quickly up to them, and touching his hat to Bertie, begged to be informed if that road was the most direct to the Vicarage. Having received his answer in the affirmative, he put his horse again to his speed, and rode off down the lane and out of sight.

Bertie's own experience told him that this man was undoubtedly the bearer of a telegraphic message, and as such things were not often sent to the Vicarage, he feared that he might be the bearer of unwelcome news. Anxious, however, not to let any forebodings of the kind become apparent in

his face, he turned with some commonplace remark as to the comparative distance of two roads which offered themselves for their acceptance, when he saw that she had turned deadly pale.

"Let us go home this way—it is the shortest," she said, pointing with her riding-whip to a gate which led through the wood, thickly interlaced with the weaving branches of trees of mature growth.

But as she turned Lancelot's head in the direction indicated, the animal planted his fore-feet together stiffly, and gave a slight snort.

"What is it?—what does he see?" the girl asked her companion in quick, excited accents—"what does Lancelot see, Bertie?—tell me quick!"

"He is frightened at the fallen tree, which has caught a gleam of sunlight—that is all."

"Are you *sure* that is all, Bertie? Can you see nothing else?"

"Nothing else, upon my word—at least, nothing that need alarm you, although it will account for Lancelot's panic," he added,

as he directed her attention to the retreating figure of a boy, who had evidently been nutting in the wood, and whose hasty flight had been detected by the startled horse.

Bessie made no reply, but with a white, scared face, and trembling in every limb, she turned her horse away from the gate, and declared that nothing should now induce her to pass the spot.

"I would rather go six miles round," she added, excitedly, as her companion remonstrated. "I am no coward, but I have seen a sight which I can never forget. Bertie, I have seen a ghost."

"I will soon convince you that your imagination has played you some trick; you shall go home afterwards whichever way you prefer."

He turned his horse from the gate for a space of some thirty yards, and then rode him at it. The animal was high-couraged and temperate, and cleared it like a deer, evidently not subject to the nervous tremors which shook Lancelot's lighter frame like a reed.

"Nimrod saw no ghost, it is very evident. Come, Bessie, shake off these nervous fears; you are making yourself ill—come."

As he spoke, Bertie held the gate invitingly open, and Lancelot, left to his own guidance, stepped delicately forward with quivering ear and dilated eye, but the encouragement he expected was not given either by the voice or hand of his mistress. The reins dropped upon his arched neck, the slight form reeled in the saddle.

Bessie had fainted away.

CHAPTER VII.

"Death finds us mid our playthings."

THE morning had dawned moist and grey, as mornings are very apt to dawn in the Emerald Isle. The moorland waste on which the Bally-whimple races were annually held was enveloped in mist, and the range of undulating hills which shut it in on every side could not be discovered through the soft driving rain which no cheering sunbeam had as yet presumed to penetrate. The course had been opened on the previous day, and experimentary gallops taken. The Bally-whimple races commanded considerable local interest among the sporting "Squireens" of the neighbourhood, but on

this occasion the officers of a dragoon regiment quartered near had entered horses for the steeple-chase—the crowning event of the day—and a much larger gathering than usual was expected in consequence.

Irishmen are proverbially indifferent to weather, and early in the mornings roughs and touts of "horsey" aspect were already on the course, expatiating with professional eloquence on the dangers of the double ditch and stone walls, and of the "big lep" at the finish, which Mike Connor's brown mare, "Kate O'Shane," had cleared like a deer, rumour said, the evening before. The officers of the — Dragoons, who were what is technically called "a sporting lot," were to drive over in the regimental drag, the Colonel of the same being great at a four-in-hand, and the horses they were going to run were essentially "dark" ones, they having been only recently imported from England, although the best of them, and the favourite in the regiment, boasted Irish parentage, of which fact his name, The Wild Irishman, was more than suggestive.

Vainly had the stolid English grooms been assailed by Paddy in every form of cajolement, from honied words to a "drop of the craythur" in the form of the purest mountain dew. They mounted guard over the cabins (stables only for the nonce) where their respective charges were housed, and were impervious to all outward impressions, but a strong appreciation of English ale.

"No more claret, gentlemen, to-night—keep your heads cool and your hands steady, as I must do if I am to tool you in safety with the scratch team I've got to Ballywhimple race-course to-morrow," the grey-bearded soldier-like-looking Colonel had observed to his "boys," as he loved to call them, at mess the night before. For he had observed, as the bottle circulated, that bets were made and taken with corresponding alacrity, and advice was tendered from every quarter to the young cornet who was to ride the favourite on the following day.

This young officer was, in fact, an old acquaintance of ours. These were the laurels which Reginald had spoken of in the letter

which never reached its intended destination, which were "to be won next week;" but Bessie was spared all anxiety on his account, and would only hear of his triumph (for triumph it was sure to be) when those laurels were well won. He had joined his regiment in Dublin, where he had quickly gained the pre-eminence, not only in all manly and athletic sports, but in the fashionable world of the Irish capital, as the best dancer and the most irresistible flirt of the whole lot.

If advice could have got into the saddle and ridden the race no other jockey would have been required for the notorious chesnut, of whom his owner affirmed, "that he was the devil to ride, and the devil to go;" and everyone believed that the dashing young cornet, who was the finest horseman in the regiment, would ride him to his own credit and theirs on the following day.

Reginald himself was in high spirits. He read Bessie's letter over that night in his barrack-room, and said, as he pressed it to his lips, on which the "silky short moustache" was beginning to sprout, "The dear girl *is*

fond of me, I believe. God bless her!"

At the same time I fear that I must reveal the fact that various little feminine relics, such as gloves, faded flowers, fans, and even suspiciously soiled packets of silver paper tied with silk, might have been found in the young officer's possession; a silent company (amongst which, however, Bessie's letter was not intruded), which could have borne witness to the fact that the constancy to a beloved absent object was not the strongest point in his character.

"Cupid" was his nick-name in the regiment, in which every man was better known by some distinguishing soubriquet, than by his own name; and he had had one or two little affairs amongst the dashing Dublin belles which had made him a marked man, if not a man of mark, amongst the dowagers and matrons of the aristocratic and vice-regal circles. His good looks and winning manners were a passport to the good graces of the daughters; but as he was not, to use the language of the matrimonial market, a *bon parti*, he was looked upon

with some degree of alarm as a favoured partner in the Vice-Regal ball-room, or attendant cavalier in the Phœnix Park. The consciousness of this fact amused him, and put him on his mettle, and he liked to create a panic amongst the dowagers "on change," as armed for conquest he swooped down upon their pretty cackling broods in white muslin and tarlatan.

He had borne the palm in Dublin as the *preux chevalier*, and squire of dames, from his compeers in the regiment; but it was not until the — Dragoons were sent to country quarters in a wild and remote locality that his pre-eminence in the sporting line came into prominent notice. The best light weight rider in the regiment, his services had been eagerly secured in cases of refractory mounts, as in the present instance. A good shot, and what was even more appreciated on a snipe moor in an Irish wild, very good company, and decidedly "a man's man." In the company of men, Reginald Kingdom held his own amongst his brother officers, as he had done at school

amongst his schoolfellows, and at college amongst the men of his set.

Bessie would have been proud of him, could she have seen him sitting like a centaur the "horse that nothin' could bate," as the Irish helper said as he proudly surveyed the animal who was a picture for symmetry and shape, and which, barring the temper of him, was the jonthleman's horse enthirely. "But it's your honour'll have the wurrd with him, and bring him to the post like a lamb."

"I hope so, Pat," was the young officer's reply, as surrounded by an eager group of his backers, he took off his over-coat, and displayed the regimental colours—scarlet, with white stripes, white cap, and sleeves; "I'm game, at all events. If the crowd don't press on him and get his temper up, he'll do."

"It's the bashful baste he is, your honour, and no mistake; but he's the rale beauty to look at, and the steeple-chaser every inch of him."

"Keep his head down, sir, and don't let

him see more of the crowd than you can help before the start," was the parting counsel of the English groom, less poetical but more practical in his advice; for the laid back ears and wicked eye of the Wild Irishman told their own tale, as by vicious buck jumps he endeavoured to dislodge his rider the instant he was in the saddle; while the subsequent flashing of his heels at intervals promised well for the clearing of the course as he took his preliminary canter in front of the stand. None of the "mother of pearl" hues of the lovely and many-coloured bonnets which deck more fashionable race-courses, turning them into blooming flowery parterres, were to be seen in the wild moorland waste of Bally-whimple on that day. But there were bright eyes, nevertheless, belonging to the female representatives of the "finest pisanthry in the world," that grew brighter as they gazed upon the Wild Irishman, and his rider, who as a horseman of singular daring and grace, attracted the attention of the young and lovely daughters of Erin, fully alive to

the appreciation of such attributes in a man.

A sprinkling of cars, an army of donkey-carts, Paddies on horseback, Paddies on ponyback, Paddies on foot, Paddies running bare-headed and bare-legged to take the horses of the young squireens as they appeared on the course on their sporting nags; gipsies, fortune-tellers, musicians, roughs, cripples, beggars of the most loathsome description, such as Ireland only can produce —all the numerous itinerants, in fact, inseparable from the idea of a race-course, swarmed upon the swampy course; and crowds formed themselves in animated groups at each of the jumps which were to try the mettle of horse and rider before the day's work was done. There was the wall, and the double ditch, the water-jump, and the combination of all three called by courtesy the "big lep," which was the last obstacle before the winning-post could be attained.

The course was three miles in length, and owing to the natural form of the obstacles

to be encountered, and the state of the ground, made rotten by incessant rains, as dangerous a one as could well have been selected. The day's proceedings having been opened by several flat races for ponies and galloways, the start for the steeplechase was made at three precisely. Ten horses started, many of them likely-looking nags, ridden by their owners, daring young fox-hunters, of the true Tipperary breed. The most formidable opponent of the Wild Irishman was a fine blood mare, by name Kate O'Shane, on whom the hopes of her backers were fixed, not without good cause. She was a noted steeplechase mare, temperate and high-couraged, while the capricious temper of the chesnut horse reduced his chances very much even in the opinion of those whose wishes were all the other way. Greatly to the dismay, too, of his backers, he showed unmistakeable signs of temper at the starting-post, lashing out at the other horses, and trying to seize the one nearest to him with his teeth.

"Be 'asy, you varmint!" was the adjura-

tion addressed to the vicious brute by the rider of the same, whose own leg was in jeopardy, while remarks were freely circulated among the eager crowd detrimental to the character of the "ill-conditioned baste."

The owner of the animal, a senior Captain in the regiment, grew pale as he overheard a remark made by an English groom among the spectators—"He'll bolt as sure as fate—he's as nasty this morning as he can possibly be, but if he means going he'll win."

"They're off!" was now the cry, and with a fierce bound the Wild Irishman jumped to the front. The first fence he flew like a deer, illustrating the truth of the marvellous grace of superior strength; there was no crowd round it, and his blood was as yet scarcely warmed, but the thunder of hoofs behind roused him as he approached the second, a stone wall, with a ditch on the taking-off side, which had been rendered rotten and slippery by the stamping of a hundred feet; this he went at with more will than judgment, his

nostril was blood-red, and there was a "lurking devil in his eye," as he caught sight of the crowd surrounding the next jump; and swerving not from the obstable before him, but from the people who fled on each side as the horses approached, Kate O'Shane, admirably ridden, shot past him like an arrow, and took the water jump in her stride.

The cheering of the Irish populace, the flourishing of their shillalaghs, the shrill voices of the women and boys, maddened the Wild Irishman to a frenzy. He followed the mare across the water with the savage bound of a wild animal, and thundered in her wake, if not entirely beyond the control of his rider, yet calling his strongest energies into play.

The excitement became intense as the last jump was neared; the chesnut again leading and held hard, as was apparent to the most inexperienced observer.

"The chesnut wins! The chesnut wins! The Irish mare's beat with the pace. The chesnut wins!" was the cry at the stand as

the horse gained at every stride, and the populace ran and rode in a living surging stream towards the last leap, which would decide the fate of the day.

At the top of his speed, with unabated fury surging in his breast, the Wild Irishman was rushing at the last fence; the people who had swarmed at it like bees scattered like leaves before the wind at the cry, "The horses are coming! make way! make way!"

Kate O'Shane was fairly distanced; on came the scarlet and white with the blind fury of steam. "Hold hard!" cried a voice in the crowd as the mad brute plunged into the air; a flash of the iron-shod hoofs, followed by a crash like thunder, the dull striking of the fore hoofs of an agonized animal on the ground, a flying flash of scarlet and white, which fell with the thud of a living body some yards away from the horse!

A wild cry from the assembled multitude, a rush from the stand, a surging of many feet towards the fatal spot.

The regimental surgeon had been the first to reach the spot, and to raise the body from the ground, where it had lain motionless for the space of a minute and a half, his verdict, as he turned a white face towards the awe-struck spectators, was, "Dead!—quite dead"—while a female voice in the crowd exclaimed, "The mother of God have mercy on the mother of him!—he was a darlint to look at, every inch of him."

As the dismal procession moved off the course, a shot was heard at the scene of the accident.

It was the last scene in the tragedy—the Wild Irishman had met the fate which he had brought upon his rider; and so ended the pastime in which folly and death ride side by side. The horse and the rider were both killed.

CHAPTER VIII.

"But you—you are not a father."
The Road to Ruin.

"ARE you sure you are better?"

"Quite sure. Please put me up, I am quite equal to riding home now."

"Shall I change the saddles? Nimrod is so much the quieter of the two."

"Oh, dear no! I am really quite ashamed of myself. Such a thing never happened to me before. Let me get home; I am very cold."

Bertie was relieved that she did not in any way refer to any supernatural cause for alarm. He himself carefully avoided any subject that could lead to it as he led Lancelot with the bridal of his own horse on the other arm. Bessie objected to this arrangement; but she was still as white as death,

and she shivered every now and then from head to foot.

"You are positively ill," Bertie observed, as he lifted her from her horse in the stable-yard, where she had chosen to dismount; "you ought to drink something warm and go to bed at once."

"It is nothing; it will pass off," she replied. "I will go in this way and up the back stairs to my own room. Oh! how delightful the warmth is," she added, as they entered the house together, and the glow of the roaring kitchen fire smote gratefully on her shivering frame. "I will have a cup of hot tea, and I shall be down to dinner, you will see."

These words were addressed to Bertie, as she gathered up her riding-habit, and prepared to ascend the back staircase; but there was an expression in her eyes which alarmed him, and her teeth rattled and chattered in her head in spite of her efforts to restrain them.

He was anxious and uneasy until the time arrived when Bessie generally came

down, dressed for dinner, about five minutes before it was served.

His mother observing his anxious looks, asked in her languid drawl, which she had lately adopted, "Whether they had enjoyed their ride. I was watching for your return," she went on, "but Bessie, who never does anything like anyone else, chose as usual, I suppose, to dismount in the yard."

"She is not at all well—she had a sort of fainting attack, which frightened me to death. She ought to be attended to, I am convinced; she is looking wretchedly ill."

"What's that you say?—what's that?" asked the Squire, who had entered the room during the conversation, and who now addressed this question to Bertie, in his quick fidgety way.

"Bertie thinks your daughter is not looking well, my dear. Should you like her to see Mavors?"

"Mavors is a fool; if she sees anyone, let her see Knight."

It was one of the Squire's peculiarities never to surrender to any one's opinion or

advice without some qualification on his own part. Meanwhile Bertie's looks reverted frequently and anxiously to the door, but Bessie never came.

Instead, Mr. Serschal presently appeared, without, however, the stereotyped formula of "dinner is served" upon his lips.

"Can I speak to you a moment, sir," he said, addressing himself to Mr. Duberry, who turned pale and followed him at once into the hall. At the same moment Lucy, Bessie's maid, came running downstairs, evidently greatly terrified, and exclaiming that her young lady was very ill.

"You've not been fool enough to tell her anything?" the butler anxiously enquired; for, as the reader will doubtless have anticipated, news had been brought to the Vicarage of the fatal result of the Bally-whimple steeple-chase.

"I had no opportunity to tell her anything—my poor young lady was lying on the bed in her habit when I went in just now, exactly as I left her an hour ago. 'I'm very tired, Lucy,' she said, 'you can come when it

is time to dress.' Twice I went and knocked at the door, and thinking my young lady was asleep, I did not like to disturb her—but at last I got frightened and went in."

"What's all this?" exclaimed the Squire, who thinking, from the mysterious manner of Mr. Serschal, that something was seriously amiss, now joined the anxious group.

"Bessie ill! faint? I never knew her faint in my life. Saddle a horse and send for a medical man, Mavors—any one—the first you can find immediately."

"I will go, sir," Bertie replied; "you may depend on my losing no time."

No one had observed that Mrs. Rigors, with her stealthy cat-like step, had crossed the hall during the commotion, or knew that she had entered the drawing-room, where, standing opposite to her mistress, her thin tight lips drawn closely over her teeth, she had hissed the sentence into her ear—

"Mr. Reginald is dead!—killed in a steeple-chase—the news has just come to the Vicarage by a telegraphic message."

"Dead, woman?—do you say he is dead?" Mrs. Marchmont cried, as, with an action like that of some galvanized, inanimate figure, rather than of a living human frame, she rose from her seat on the sofa, and grasped the arm of Mrs. Rigors so convulsively that she made her cry out. "You dare not tell me that he is *dead!*"

"Compose yourself, ma'am, if you do not wish to make yourself as ill as you look in good earnest. The poor young gentleman was killed, they say, in a steeple-chase. They're dreadfully dangerous things; but whatever you do, now, don't *you* take on."

"Where is my husband?—where is the Squire?" the woman asked, who was so little accustomed to lean upon any one for support; but she had received a great shock.

"Mr. Marchmont's in the hall, ma'am. Mr. Serschal's been a-telling of him and Mr. Bertie, and Miss Marchmont's lying like a dead thing upstairs on her bed. How she heard the news, God only knows!—no one told her."

"Oh my God! send my husband to me, Rigors—I am ill."

The lady's looks did not indeed belie her words. She followed Mrs. Rigors into the hall, where the Squire was still in conversation with the butler, who had imparted to him the fatal news, and laying her hand upon his arm, she said in appealing accents, "Do not leave me, Geoffrey, I am ill."

"My dear, my dear, what can I do for you, and Bessie ill too upstairs? Will you come up with me, and ascertain what is the matter?" he asked very tenderly, and drawing his wife's hand through his arm as he spoke. But the mention of his daughter's name caused a re-action—perhaps a wholesome one for herself—in Mrs. Marchmont's breast. Of illness in any shape she had an instinctive dread, and in her present condition it would be madness (so she argued) to expose herself to any shock; and withdrawing her hand coldly from that of her husband, who laid on it an affectionately detaining grasp, she replied pettishly, "I can

be of no use—I daresay she would much rather I did not."

The last observation no doubt impressed Mr. Marchmont with the idea of its truth, for requesting his wife to return to the drawing-room and await his return, he himself hastened upstairs, escorted by Lucy, to whom he addressed a few hasty questions on the subject of her young mistress's health.

"She had not heard anything, sir, of the accident, that I can vouch for," she said in a whisper, with her hand on the handle of the door as she spoke; an observation which was responded to with a solemn "Thank God!" on the part of the anxious father.

"It's certainly most extraordinary," he said, as he entered the room which Bessie had lately asked to have appropriated to her own use—the one which had been her mother's boudoir, and which adjoined the one in which she had breathed her last, over the threshold of which the Squire had not stepped for eighteen years. A dainty couch, with hangings of silk, had been fitted up in a

recess of the pleasant quaint chamber, which was furnished in the most perfect taste, so that with every appliance of refinement and even luxury, nothing intruded itself ostentatiously on the eye. Cabinets and marquetry work, Venetian glasses, quaint smelling-bottles in filigree stands, old china, and carved oak panelling, with here and there a broad strip of costly tapestry, relieving the more sombre hues with the greatest effect,—such were the surroundings which Bessie had loved to gather about her, for they spoke to her of the mother whose love she had never known.

The Squire stumbled over the threshold. He had forgotten the little step of which the force of habit had once made him instinctively conscious; but the blunder and Lucy's nervous ejaculation attendant on it had not the effect of arousing Bessie from the state of profound unconsciousness (it could scarcely be called sleep) into which she had fallen.

Her father approached the bed with uncertain nervous steps, and an exclamation of

terror escaped him as he gazed upon the pale form, as he drew aside the curtain which had partly intercepted his view.

Still in her riding-habit, the dark ground of which threw up in strong relief the pure pale chiselled face, she lay in too easy an attitude to suggest the actual presence of death, yet immoveable as though carved in statuary marble. Her lips, which retained their natural colour, were a little apart, and her beautiful hair, disordered, fell upon the pillow like a cloud—pushed back from the temples in which the network of veins showed like turquoise on an alabaster vase.

Her hand, small and choicely shaped, lay half hidden amongst the folds of her riding-skirt, and as the Squire took it up tenderly between both of his own, he said to Lucy, who was helpless in the extremity of her terror, "It is cold—cold as death!"

"Oh! whatever shall we do, sir?" responded the girl thus addressed, wringing her hands in their strong emergency, and entirely ignorant even as to the common means employed for restoring a fainting person.

"I do wish aunt was here, that I do;" the "aunt" referred to being the *late* housekeeper Mrs. Minching, who had retired from the Squire's service in dignified dudgeon when the advent of a new mistress had been announced. She was a "comfortable body" in illness, even her friends allowed, and she would have been of the greatest use on an occasion like the present, when the mistress was panting and fuming downstairs, and working herself into a passion at any one's engrossing the time and attention of the master of the house and usually obedient husband and slave, but herself.

She rang the bell violently, but the butler was standing at the gates of the stable-yard watching Mr. Duberry out of sight, and the footman in his absence were gossiping about the news at the Vicarage, and did not immediately attend to it, so Mrs. Marchmont had to ring again.

"Send Mrs. Rigors here at once," she said with the air of haughty arrogance which she always assumed towards the servants in that house; and during the short time which

elapsed between the giving of the message and the arrival of her maid, she had worked herself up into a fit of hysterical sobbing, caused by the feeling of intense pity and tenderness which she entertained for herself under such untoward and trying circumstances.

To the care of Mrs. Rigors we will commit her, while we return to the more interesting patient upstairs.

No colour had as yet returned to her cheeks, and she was still unconscious. An idea seized the Squire, which appeared more practical than any which had yet occurred to him.

"Send for the Colonel," he said to Lucy quickly—"ask him to come up at once—let them take the brougham—he cannot walk so far—make haste!"

The messenger found the Colonel seated by his fireside, with an open book in his hand, a quaint and curious volume bound in vellum, and with silver corners and clasps. No news had evidently reached him of the fatal accident at Bally-whimple—no news

ever did reach the Hermitage excepting through Bessie herself, and a knock at the door at an unusual hour startled the Colonel more than a roll of artillery would have startled him in the old times. He had scarcely time to say "come in," when the boy Joey put in a frightened face and said,

"Please, Cunnel, you're wanted up at the Hall—the young lady's a-dying."

"Boy!" exclaimed the Colonel, forgetting his growing infirmities, and the leg almost crippled with tic, and springing to his feet, "beware how you lie to me! What do you mean, sir? Who sent you with this message to me?—who is here?"

"Please, sir, Mr. Dermott, the coachman, has come hisself with the carriage to fetch you; and, oh! please, Cunnel, I wouldn't tell you a lie about such a thing as that. If the young lady dies I shall have ne'er a friend left in the world—she were always good to me, *she* were."

The housekeeper here entered and acted as a conductor to carry off the wrath which was about to descend upon Joey's devoted

head; she soon explained to her master the real state of the case, and added—

"Shall I come up to the Hall along with you, sir? I was reckoned a good nurse in my time."

"By all means; but come as you are, I can't wait. Never mind your cap," the Colonel added, as the good woman's hands began to wander suggestively about her head-gear, and he literally pushed her down the walk before him, and helped her into the carriage more with the alacrity of a score of years, than with the decrepitude of the old man he had lately become.

"Bless you! my dear Colonel, bless you!" exclaimed the Squire, as the former entered the room, and at once approached the object of all their solicitude, who had as yet given no signs of returning life. "Here's this poor child in a dead faint or fit of some sort—the young fellow has ridden off for Mavors, but I thought in the meantime the best thing I could do was to send for you. You're something of a doctor, you know, Colonel, and we are all at our wit's end."

"Thank you," the Colonel replied, with deep feeling, "for sending. We will see what can be done until the doctor arrives. How long has this poor child been like this?"

"For more than an hour, for certain—how much longer we don't know. She came in tired from her ride, and said she would lie down till dressing-time. Lucy was frightened at no notice being taken of repeated knocks, came in and found her thus."

"Had she heard or seen anything to alarm her?"

"Not that we know anything of," the Squire answered, rather dubiously. He was thinking of *the* news which had almost been banished from his own mind by the illness of his daughter, and he looked questioningly at the Colonel, as though he would say, "What do you suspect?"

Knowing nothing, however, of the terrible truth which the Squire knew, his suspicions were not aroused as to the extent of Bessie's knowledge of the circumstance which was filling so many hearts with horror

and dread—and which would have seared her own like the touch of a hot iron. He occupied himself in giving directions to Lucy to loosen the "hooks and things," while he himself tenderly raised her head, under which he placed another pillow. He was himself no despicable nurse, and with the readiness of a woman, and the tenderness of a man, he busied himself about the passive form which lay, as it were, so beautiful in death, but which at the first glance his experience told him was only a temporary suspension of life, from nervous exhaustion, or some other cause.

"Poor child!" he said, as he stroked the rich hair still further back from her brow, "she must have suffered much; we had better let her rest thus till the doctor comes."

"Oh! my child—my darling, my precious Bessie!" sobbed the poor father, now quite overcome, and covering the unconscious hand with kisses and tears. "Won't you look at me?—won't you speak to me?

—won't you call me 'poor papa' once again?"

The Colonel looked on gravely at this scene. He had previously dismissed Lucy and his housekeeper, and mounted guard himself at the pillow, pressed by the head of one who was all he had left to care for in this world.

He did not recognise the presence of any actual imminent danger, but he would not let the Squire share in that security, until he had worked upon the heart in which anguish was now turning up long furrows to receive the seed.

"Squire," he said solemnly, "if we once get her out of this we must be very tender with her. It will not do to thwart a nature like hers. She must have suffered terribly before nature gave way like this."

"She shall never be thwarted or contradicted again, if God will only give her back to me. God knows I did all for the best!"

"She has suffered in *many* ways."

"My poor darling!—it was all that con-

founded love affair. And this news to come just now! Good God!"

The Colonel did not understand to what Mr. Marchmont referred in this last speech; which partook, too, of the nature of a soliloquy, and was not addressed to him, so he said,

"My dear Squire, you blind yourself, but you cannot blind others. It was not Bessie's fault that you gave her a step-mother who is breaking her heart; but you can make some reparation in another way. One kind word from you of the young fellow who has won her affections (and a finer young fellow never stepped). will bring her back warm and loving to your arms. You will lose her if you deal harshly with her in this matter. So remember, Squire, you are warned."

The poor father had grown livid as death under the awakening probe of the Colonel's words. For a moment he was silent, and then he faltered as meekly as a penitent child,

"The reparation you speak of is out of

my power. Young Kingdom is dead. O God! must I lose my child!"

"Dead!—young Kingdom dead! Impossible! The Rector passed my gate this afternoon, and we had a friendly chat together. You must be dreaming, my dear Squire—indeed you must."

"Would to God that I were! No, it is too true. He was killed in some steeple-chase, and the news only came an hour or two ago. I am sorry for them, from the depths of my heart!"

"Then this poor child's state is accounted for; but only greatly to aggravate my fears. If this is the effect of a sudden shock, it is more alarming than I believed at first."

"They all assure me to the contrary. Bertie knew nothing, and he was out riding with her, and entered the house with her. She saw no one but Lucy, and she could not have told her, because she knew nothing herself until after the poor child was—was like this," the Squire added, bursting into a flood of tears so violent and so uncontrollable, that he was fain to bury his face in

his handkerchief and sob aloud; while the Colonel, feeling as much and perhaps more, stood, with his grave set features, looking as though they were carved in stone.

"Thank God!" he said at last; "I hear horses' hoofs. The doctor is come at last!"

A low knock at the door, and Lucy announced the arrival of Mr. Mavors, the doctor—the same who had attended the first Mrs. Marchmont in her fatal illness. He had, indeed, never entered the room into which he was now shown since he had held there the consultation with the great London physician, a notable fact in his quiet professional career.

"Mamma's room," as of late Bessie had loved to call it, had been held consecrated to her memory for all these years; and since Bessie had occupied it, Lucy was the only person in the house privileged to enter the sacred precincts.

There was a tacit understanding between Bessie and her step-mother, that the former's own privacy was not to be sacrificed to her domineering will. Mr. Mavors, the doctor,

was decidedly a clever man, but so conventional in his manner that it was difficult to believe that he ever entered into the human side of the question at all. The sick person was essentially "the patient" with him; he entirely ignored the anxious appealing eye, the faltering voice of the relatives or friends, as the balance of life trembled on this side or on that side a little, with the awful significance to which comparative ignorance adds nameless but manifold terrors, which a genuine *opinion* of the doctor's, even if not altogether a favourable one, would go far to soften and subdue.

"I will not deceive you, there *is* a certain amount of danger, but there is nothing to be alarmed at in this particular symptom," would be a less harassing sentence than the evasive one so often on the professional lip in such an emergency, accompanied perhaps by some apparently irrelevant question on his part, so persistently persevered in that we begin to attach a terrible importance to it, and to hang upon the answer of the nurse or attendant as we might hang on the

verdict of a jury in a trial for life or death. The remedies which were applied under his direction succeeded, after a time, in restoring the young girl to consciousness.

"The nervous system," he said, "must either have sustained a shock, or there must be a severe tax or strain upon the mental powers. Something on her mind, in plain English," he concluded. "It is not a case for the doctor. You must keep her mind constantly diverted; let her have cheerful society, and above all, for the present, thwart and contradict her in nothing. Let life present an agreeable surface, and do not allow her time and opportunity for the mind to prey upon itself. Physically speaking, your daughter is in perfect health."

This assurance, from such good authority, was so entirely satisfactory to the Squire, who always went into extremes, that he hastened to reassure himself and all about him by proclaiming that Mr. Mavors had pronounced Bessie to be "perfectly well. A nervous attack—that is all. He did not

seem to think seriously of it in any way," he remarked, as he sat by her side on the sofa in the inner drawing-room, endeavouring, by various little conjugal attentions, to appease her wrath, and to make the *amende honorable* for having kept her waiting for two hours or more for her dinner, an offence which, notwithstanding the great shock she had received, she was not inclined to pass over without evincing serious tokens of displeasure and pique.

"I never have *any patience* with nervous attacks. It's the worst thing in the world to allow a girl of her age to fancy herself ill. I always maintain that anybody can help that sort of thing if they choose, and what Mr. Mavors says about Bessie confirms me in that idea."

"I can't agree with you there. She has plenty of pluck," answered the Squire, whose conscience smote him for allowing so false a construction to be put upon the doctor's words.

It is generally women who, like Mrs. Marchmont, can only feel either pain, fear,

or anxiety for themselves, that deny the existence of a "nervous system," over which the will has no control, on the part of others, whose organization is more delicate and sensitive to the depressing influence of an over-taxed brain. Mrs. Marchmont was a coward at heart; she shrank from pain in her own person, or from the very shadow of any danger threatening herself, but she could bear, with remarkable equanimity, pain, suffering, and danger on the part of another. Therefore she had *no* patience with nervous attacks brought on by worry and harass of mind.

Bertie, in the meantime, was distracted with grief for the untimely fate of one who had been dear to him as a brother, spite of his many failings, and the lordly selfishness of his nature, which his very last request to Bertie had proved; for Reginald well knew that the latter could not go down to Marchmont to cheer up Bessie, as he had put it to him, without a sharp struggle with himself, and the sacrifice of his own peace of mind. But what were such minor considerations, in

the face of this great sorrow? A sorrow which strikes like a hand of ice on the heart of a man in his vigour and prime; who feels as it were in his own heart-strings the agony of the wrench, and cries aloud in the strong anguish with which he endows the departing soul of his lost friend.

The sorrow of such a one is a thing too deep for words. After Bertie had satisfied himself from the doctor's own lips that no danger was to be apprehended for Bessie, "no present danger," he had cautiously added, stealing a furtive glance at the young man as he spoke, he had rushed away from the presence of his kind, and in silence and solitude paid to the memory of his friend the tribute of the bitterest tears that had ever brimmed over his honest brave hazel eyes.

"To the memory of Reginald!" There was a cruel anomaly in the very thought that he whose principal characteristic had been an overflow and superabundance of life was *dead.*

The short, cold, iron word smote upon

the senses when applied to him, as the sting of an asp upon the hand which trifles with the blossoms of the sunny South. What had death to do with him? The bright-hearted, manly boy, as his grey-haired father still called him; the idol and darling of his mother's heart. And then that other word of still more terrible import presented itself to the tortured imagination—"killed!" Killed—in the summer of his youth, and how? Not in the fore-front of the battle, not in the pursuit of legitimate manly sport, for the sake of sport, where exceptional danger is honourably braved and met, but where it is challenged—nay, invited, in the exercise of a senseless and cruel pastime by the ghastly leer of the madman and the fool. The *manner* of Reginald's death, indeed, added one very bitter drop to the cup which his heart-stricken parents were draining to the dregs.

"My boy!—my poor boy!" groaned the father, whose dry vacant eyes proclaimed the extremity of his grief; "I should have advised him better. His death lies

at my door! Oh! my God! my God!"

And with a silence that might have been taken for acquiescence, but which was the dumbness of a heart whose master-chord had been snapped, his wife clasped the thin, blue-veined, scholar-like hand in her own, while she rocked herself with the incessant motion of the surging wave of grief that will not break, to and fro, ever to and fro towards "the sullen sea-board of despair."

It was afterwards observed of Mrs. Kingdom that from the moment she heard the news of Reggie's death she was never seen to smile.

CHAPTER XI.

"Treu und fest."

LATE, very late that night, Bertie returned to the house. He was very pale, very silent, very sad, but he had faced his grief, had wrestled with it in the inner chamber of his heart, and he no longer shunned the society of his relations, but entered the little drawing-room where the Squire and his wife, still up, were talking over the terrible accident, particulars of which the awful curtness of a telegram had been powerless to convey.

"I wish you to give orders to have the blinds of the reception-rooms drawn down to-morrow," the Squire was saying, with a touch of the old pomposity of manner, and

taking a practical view of the subject which shot a strange pang into Bertie's affectionate heart; "I should like to show them that mark of respect."

There was a tear in the Squire's eye, and which he vainly tried to blink away, which would have gone straighter to the hearts of the bereaved parents than the cold sign of respect which had, however, been dictated by good feeling on Mr. Marchmont's part; for it was a compliment which had never before been paid to an ex-family corpse within the memory of man, that the blinds at Marchmont should be drawn down.

"And your daughter, my dear, who is to tell her? I own that, with her weak hysterical temperament, I dread the effect upon her more than I can say."

"I do not think that Bessie is naturally either weak or hysterical," the Squire replied, rather on his mettle, for the "family temperament" was like a family heirloom, and Bessie was his own flesh and blood.

"Of course you are aware of the unfortunate attachment which existed between her and the poor young fellow who's gone—at least, that *did* exist?"

This was touching on dangerous ground. The Squire was silent for a space, and then answered with some petulance,

"I knew that there was some childish nonsense between them, but nothing more; and then turning to his step-son, of whom he was getting fond, because he was getting dependent on him for family peace, he asked, "Did anything happen to frighten her when she was out riding with you to-day?"

"She did not seem quite herself," he replied, after a moment's hesitation; he did not like to mention Bessie's momentary hallucination before his mother, who would he knew have put it to the account of the "weak hysterical temperament" of which she had made mention before. Besides, he now firmly believed that the illusion was the effect rather than the cause; and that the strain upon the nervous system which a

secret and silent anxiety entails had created the phantom and its consequent results. He thought the safest answer, therefore, to the Squire's question was the one I have quoted—"She did not seem quite herself."

"She mopes too much alone in that room," here put in Mrs. Marchmont. "I have often wondered at your allowing it, my dear. Mind, I am not speaking with a view to your requiring your daughter to devote more of her time than is agreeable to her upon *me*. I am perfectly independant in the matter. But I look upon it as a bad thing as regards her own health."

The Squire was silent—he was meditating an escape to Bessie's room, to ascertain whether she was comfortably settled for the night, and perhaps with a yearning in his heart to whisper some of the old loving words in her ear to fortify it against the pain that was to come.

Bertie, with his usual ready tact, said,

"I will stay with my mother, sir, if you are thinking of going upstairs;" and the Squire darting him a grateful look,

took advantage of his offer, and retired.

Bessie was not asleep, and she recognised at once the familiar step, although her father had left the candle outside with a forethought not common with him. Perhaps he did not wish her to observe any traces of perturbation on his countenance, for he had been warned that it was as much as her life was worth to let her even suspect that those about her were the harbingers of evil tidings, or that there was anything which they wished to conceal. Mrs. Marchmont had been there, half an hour before.

"Daddy," Bessie whispered softly, as, on his bending to kiss her, she wound her arms round his neck, and pressed her soft flushed cheek to his—"dear old Daddy, will you promise me one thing?—don't let Mrs. Marchmont come again. I cannot bear it—she irritates me dreadfully. Feel my head, Daddy—and I was *so* comfortable before she came."

"She means it kindly, darling," was the sole reply. The Squire was an old man again at once, feeble and wavering of purpose, and he went on in the meandering

way which had lately taken the place of the former authoritative manner,—"she thinks you are too much alone, and that you get moped and ill. You must rouse yourself, my love; make an effort to please me!"

Bessie made no reply—her arms relaxed their hold a little round her father's neck, and she heaved a bitter sigh.

"Where is Uncle Rex?" she asked, turning the subject. "I saw him before I went off to sleep."

"I did not disturb you, darling, I trust. The Colonel is here—we have had the blue-room prepared for him. I could not let him go back to-night."

"I am not very ill—am I, Daddy?"

"No, my sweet one—no, do not think that for a moment. Why, you do not feel very ill, do you, darling?"

"No, Daddy, I don't *think* it; perhaps I hoped a little, just a very little, you know, that I was——"

"I never heard anything so wicked in my life," broke in a voice that sounded loud and harsh in that dim shady room, which the

patient would gladly have had made "blind to light, and deaf to noise," on that occasion; the two essentials which only can make a sleeping chamber an elysium to a nervous invalid.

"It really is tempting Providence to send you some *real* judgment," Mrs. Marchmont (for it was she) went on, with an emphasis on *real*, which was meant to imply how unreal and imaginary she considered Bessie's illness (brought on by weeks of secret torture, for which her step-mother could best have accounted) to be.

"I have brought a night-light," she added, "and Rigors shall sit up. You had better go to bed," she said sharply, turning to her husband as she spoke. "I am sure she ought not to be encouraged to talk."

"I will not have that woman in my room!" Bessie exclaimed, now thoroughly aroused, and sitting up in her bed; the direction of her eyes, large and bright, with unnatural lustre, indicating that Mrs. Rigors was the person alluded to. The latter was already preparing a sofa-bed with shawls,

cushions, and coverlets, for the reception of her somewhat portly person, during the hours of the so-called watch. "If I want anyone, which I am not likely to do, I can ring for Lucy."

"A young girl like Lucy is totally incapable in a sick-room," was the cold reply. "If I have any authority, or any responsibility in this house, I will have my own way in this matter. Rigors, you will remain."

"Madam," said a voice even more authoritative than her own, "I must beg to interfere with this arrangement, even at the risk of incurring your displeasure. I had previously received the Squire's sanction to the plan that my housekeeper, Mrs. Martin, should undertake the care of Miss Marchmont as long as she requires it. She is a trained and careful nurse. Do you not see that the presence of a stranger"—here Mrs. Rigors was courteously expressed by an inclination of the Colonel's head—"is exciting her to a fever; and the *utmost* quiet has been enjoined by the doctor. I am sure, under these circumstances, you

would be the last not to fall in with all our views."

Like all other hectoring natures, Mrs. Marchmont soon recognised the presence of a master-mind. She had no wish to enter into a trial of strength with the Colonel; and, crestfallen and defeated, she beat a hasty retreat, followed by Mrs. Rigors, swelling with rage, and soon after by the Squire himself.

The scene, however, had had the effect of keeping Bessie's eyes wide open for the greater part of the night; and the next morning the doctor reported of her as not quite so well as he had expected. Again and again he enjoined the profoundest quiet, and expressed the necessity of all news of a painful nature being kept from his patient for the present. For the doctor had guessed at the secret which lay palpitating in the human heart with which he had to deal; and framed his advice accordingly.

It was not difficult to keep the secret of Reggie's death from her as long as she lay there unconscious even of the fact of the

blinds drawn down in the reception-rooms below, or of the daily calls at the Vicarage of a servant in the Marchmont livery, to inquire "how the family were?" to which conventional query the usual answer was as punctually returned, "they were much obliged for kind inquiries, and that the family were as well as could be expected."

Bessie knew nothing of all this as she lay very quiet and still in a state of what Mr. Mavors called nervous prostration. Even on the day of the funeral (the body had been brought home to be buried) she did not comment upon the tolling bell. "Her eyes," so Lucy reported, grew larger and brighter as the sound fell upon her ear; and she had said quietly, "I could wish that it was for me!"—that had been all; then she had clasped her hands together under her weary head, with its masses of dishevelled hair, and had so fallen asleep.

CHAPTER X.

"Sorrow ends not when it seemeth done."

King Richard II.

BUT this state of things could not last for ever. The blinds had been drawn up after the funeral had taken place; the daily visits of the livery servant had been discontinued, and the state of the bereaved family accepted on hear-say, and Bessie was getting stronger daily. Who was to say to *her* the fatal words, "*he is dead?*"

If I have faithfully fulfilled my task as a character-painter, the reader will be at no loss to guess. Who but Bertie? Bertie the unselfish, Bertie the loyal, Bertie the "treu und fest,"—the task will certainly fall upon him.

It did. The news of Reggie's death had

been a great personal blow to him; but his own grief had become absorbed in his feeling of deep sympathy with her who had lately said to him, "I *did* love him, God knows how dearly!" He well knew with a nature like hers how green a life must still be hidden within the bleeding stem of that "I did."

It was therefore with a feeling of the greatest dread for the consequences that he knocked softly one evening at her room door—the room which since her illness she had insisted upon making her sitting-room. "Because here," she said, with her sweet sad smile,

"the mournful smile which breaks the heart,"

"I can receive my friends without the trouble of going downstairs—papa, and Uncle Rex, and Bertie; and you know, daddy, that I am to be indulged. Mr. Mavors said so, did he not?"

She was sitting at the window looking out upon the flower-garden, when her low "Come in," responded to Bertie's knock.

The early frosts had begun to play sad havoc amongst the glowing beds—the heliotropes, black and disconsolate, seemed to be gone into mourning for the vanished glory of the garden; and the dahlias hung their proud heads, as though ashamed to lift their tarnished and soiled fronts to the October sun; but a certain aromatic breath, the breath of autumn, fell gratefully on the senses, sadly impressed with these signs of approaching decay.

"Are you better to-day, Bessie? Are you feeling pretty strong?"

"I am pretty well—I am getting strong," was the reply, as the young girl raised her eyes quietly to Bertie's face, and let them rest in their deep velvet softness upon his.

"Getting strong—but not strong yet? How long is this state of things to continue?"

There was an attempt at his old playfulness of manner as Bertie pronounced the words, but the dread was in his honest eyes, which never lied, even in a good cause, all the same.

"I do not know—I do not much care; everything is alike to me now."

"See, Bessie, I have brought you a white rose—'the last rose of summer;' a sorrowful emblem of decay, but it is still sweet."

Bessie took the rose in her small well-shaped hand, and Bertie noticed that it had grown very thin.

"It would be as good a flower as another," she said as she took it, "to plant upon an early grave."

"What do you mean?" he asked in the purposeless vague way in which those ask questions who are striving to gain time before they fulfil some painful, but necessary task.

"You know what I mean, Bertie; you have not thought to deceive me all this time like the rest. I know very well what you are come to say."

She looked at him as she said the words with a mournful intensity of expression, which she found it hard to bear.

"You know, Bessie?"

"Yes, I know that you are come to break

ill-news to me. But you need not—you need not, Bertie; you may save your kind heart the pain of that, for I knew it long ago. Reggie is dead—killed," she added solemnly—"killed, and I shall never see him again!"

"Would to God that I could contradict you," Bertie said after a pause, moved with strong emotion—"would to God that I could! But by what mysterious agency have you become possessed of this knowledge?"

"I have known it," she replied; and then she added, without an effort apparently, while the restrained sobs were heaving painfully in Bertie's bosom, "How is poor Mrs. Kingdom?"

There was a stony sort of calmness about her, which was more alarming to him than the most passionate demonstration of grief would have been.

"She is broken-hearted," he replied sadly.

"And his poor father, who was so proud of him, how does he take it?"

"He will never hold up his head again.

It is a fearful thing. I cannot realize it. I cannot believe that he is really dead."

"But I have known it now for so many days. Since the day when they buried him. At one time the knowledge of it would have broken my heart."

"You are not yourself, Bessie. You have not been for some time. You are letting some secret sorrow prey upon your life. Will you not confide in me?"

"You do not know what a confidence you seek. You do not know—you never can know what a woman feels whose love has been scorned. I could not have forgiven him in life; but he is dead, and I can love him again. *I can be very faithful to his memory now.*"

"I think you are labouring under some strange mistake. Reginald was devoted to you heart and soul."

A spasm of pain passed over the beautiful features, agitating them as we have seen a gust of wind agitate the dormant waves of a mountain lake, but leaving them cold and statuesque as before.

"You are very loyal, very generous, very true, Bertie," she said, holding out her hand to him; and who shall say that in that praise from her lips that he did not reap his reward for his fidelity to the memory of his friend, "but I have a bitter proof to the contrary. I wrote to him—I am glad now that I did—telling him that I loved him still—that I was willing, if he still wished it, to be his;—yes, Bertie, I wrote him *that*, and he never answered my letter—never afterwards even mentioned my name in his letters to his mother—treated me and my love,"—here a deep scorching blush died the pale cheek crimson—"with the most profound contempt of all—the contempt of silence. You see," she went on, as every particle of colour forsook her face and even lips, so fatally rapid was the ebb and flow of the living tide—"you see how long Reggie has been dead to me. You wonder that I do not cry, but I shed so many tears for Reggie while he still lived, that now he is dead the fountain is run dry. My heart is breaking for his poor mother;

but for myself, all that has passed. Look here," she added, turning as she spoke, and opening the drawer of a little inlaid cabinet which stood in a recess behind where she was sitting, "I can look at these even with dry eyes."

It was the photograph with which Reginald had presented her on the occasion of their last interview, at the back of which he had written, in his bold, clear hand, "Bessie's till death—Reginald," while loose in the case, tied with a strand of blue silk, lay a lock of the red roan's mane—the same which Bessie had twined caressingly round her fingers in that last, long, lingering talk in the park, before Reginald joined his regiment, now nearly a year ago.

"I shall never part with them," she said quietly, as she noted that Bertie turned his face away, while his strong frame was convulsed with the spasms of grief which the sight of these relics of his lost friend had aroused within him. "I am glad that I kept them—but as for my love, Bertie, *that* is dead. I cannot feel as you do—I would

not if I could. He did not give me the *right* to mourn for him. God knows, it would have been better for me than this!"

She pressed her hand to her side as she spoke, while her eyes had the dull, vacant look of one who has been recently stunned. Bertie was much alarmed.

"Do rouse yourself—do allow yourself to mourn for him naturally; he was so young, so handsome, so——"

"Oh! don't, Bertie; if you love me, don't ask me to mourn for him *both ways*—it would kill me. If he were dead *for* me, as he has been dead *to* me for so many cruel weeks, I should die—I should die! I had better be left alone; but I should like you some day to put this flower on poor Reggie's grave; I know where he lies, under the great yew close by the old grey wall—say, 'From Bessie,' and leave it, and come away. Pray for me, Bertie, but leave me now."

With the innocent grace of a child, she leant her head towards him for an instant, but in that instant flashed on his brain an image from which it was never effaced—the

rich mass of dark hair, down which the even parting ran like an ivory thread, the oblique slant of the high, thoughtful brows, and the heavy fringes of the drooping eyes, from which tears fell in heavy splashes on the clasped hands, while sobs of painful intensity shook the slight frame like a reed. He stooped and imprinted a kiss—a brother's kiss—upon her forehead; murmured "God bless and comfort you, Bessie!" and then hastily left the room.

For an hour after she sat still in the same position at the window in which Bertie had surprised her—looking out at the garden, with its beds of blackened summer flowers, the emblems, as she told herself, of her own life.

CHAPTER XI.

"I have a silent sorrow here,
A grief I'll ne'er impart;
It breathes no sigh, it sheds no tear,
But it consumes my heart."

KOTZEBUE.

THE winter months had dragged heavily through at the Hall, and spring was beginning to drape nature in her mantle of green. Bertie had returned to chambers soon after Christmas. Mrs. Marchmont was in bad spirits, and was gradually relinquishing the affected importance which had become almost second nature since her sudden elevation to the enjoyment of a position far above that to which her day-dreams had once pointed. She reigned and ruled indeed sole mistress of Marchmont now; for Bessie, since the shock she had experienced in the autumn, had ceased to make the slight-

est opposition to her domineering will. She had lived, as it were, in a sort of dream-land; but those who thought she was deeply lamenting Reggie's death only, were mistaken. The wound which had pierced so deep was not the one made by his death, but by that cruel silence which had smitten her heart with a dull numbing pain. She had sorely missed Bertie, whose presence had been soothing and grateful to her. She was not given to analyse her feelings. If anyone had told her that he stood a fair chance of gaining her affections, she would have repudiated the idea with contempt.

Between herself and Mrs. Kingdom, the broken-hearted woman whose grief it would once have been her fondest task to share and alleviate, an invisible barrier of reserve had sprung up; while upon Mrs. Marchmont, the authoress of the mischief, a curse seemed to have fallen like a spell.

Bessie's step-mother, whose cruel hands had crushed the happiness out of her life, was haunted by a presentiment which poi-

soned the sources of her own. Her situation was no longer a secret. Her day of trial was at hand, of which everyone at Marchmont was aware, with the exception of the one principally concerned in the issue of it—Bessie herself. No one had dared to inform her of a fact which had now become apparent to the most indifferent observer. The Colonel himself shrank from the task, although he believed it was a cruel kindness which spared the blow.

Since the great shadow had fallen upon her life, Bessie had made the people and the place her one great solace and interest. "It will one day be mine!" she had once observed to Uncle Rex; for her whole nature seemed to have undergone a change, and the tenderness for her father, which once would have made such a speech impossible, was apparently uprooted in her heart.

"God knows!" was the Colonel's inadvertent reply; and Bessie turned upon him such an eager, questioning glance, that his own sank beneath it.

"What do you mean, Uncle Rex? Papa cannot leave Marchmont away from me; he cannot rob me of that, as he has done of everything else. Do not tell me *that*, if you love me!"

"*He* cannot rob you, dear child, but there are contingencies to which all property is liable. It is not like you, darling, to make a passion of your inheritance."

"If I have nothing else left to make a passion of, you can hardly be surprised," was the cold reply; and Uncle Rex sighed as he thought of the possible future, and of a peal from the old church bells, welcoming an heir to Marchmont, and ringing the death-knell of Bessie's remaining hopes in life. The poor people looked sadly at her, as she went in and out of their cottages, with little dainties from the table for the sick and aged.

"Only think, Sally, if it should be a son and *ar!*" said a buxom matron, pausing over her washing-tub, into which her comely arms were plunged elbow-deep in lather and soapsuds. "It would break our young

lady's heart, and she as pale as a white rose now, ever since her sweetheart was killed."

"It's a bonnie face, too, I'm thinking; and it's not likely she'll want for a sweetheart long."

At home the Squire had become almost as depressed and anxious as his wife, and irritable beyond measure, as the servants and dependants found to their cost.

"Does Bessie know?" he would ask, petulantly, two or three times a day, bearing the storm of temper which invariably followed the query, as Mrs. Marchmont would turn her handsome eyes upon her husband, and flash up with—

"Certainly not; why should she? The news will not be particularly welcome to her, and your daughter's temper of late has not been so exceedingly amiable as to invite confidences between her and myself, especially when they are of an unwelcome character."

So Bessie remained in happy ignorance of the expected event; an event which might entirely reverse her position, and place her

step-mother in a prouder and more secure position than ever, as mother and natural guardian to the young *heir*.

Bertie was also unaware of the fact. He was working hard in his lonely chambers, with busy brain and pen, with one sole end in view. No matter that he could only see it, a shadowy image, down the dim vista of a distant future. If only half a step were made in a year, and that step was in the right direction, it was to him a point gained. He could love her without treachery now, and worship her image conscientiously, even if it must be from far off. The obstacle to the indulgence of his passion removed, Bertie's was not a nature to lose sight of the one great object and aim of his life, which was to make himself worthy of the woman he loved by his own exertions, and to lay his hard-earned laurels at her feet. He felt the power within him, which only required some strong ruling motive to make it an active force.

"I will win her and wear her, as she deserves to be won and worn!" he argued

proudly with himself; and the strong, clear brain went to work again, stimulated to exertion by the love that was burning in his breast.

It is a powerful alliance that of the heart and the brain, of the emotions and the intellect, which it is hard for adverse circumstances to withstand, whether its influence is exerted either for evil or for good.

Bertie had already been spoken of, by good authorities, as a young man who possessed striking qualities—who would make his way in the world; and none who had seen his countenance lighted up with the bright flame of his strong, eager spirit, kindled into eloquence on some subject in which he felt deeply, would have stopped to criticize the irregularity of his features, which were only unattractive when in perfect repose.

In London society he was sought after by women who understood the art of dinner-giving. If Herbert Duberry could be secured, there at once was an element of brilliancy, which it would require a great pre-

ponderance of "damp blankets" to quench or altogether extinquish; and his unfailing good temper, and honest bonhommie, proved a safe-guard against the clashing of adverse wits, which often neutralizes the best meant endeavours to secure the good entertainment of critical dinner guests.

"Who can we ask to meet Lord S——? (a noted wit, and *bon vivant* intolerant of wit in others)—"he and Gallpen the Reviewer are at daggers' points; and he would as soon be in a room with a snake as with Toadeater the punster," asks Lady Dalmaine of her perplexed *dame de compagnie*, who ventures to suggest under her breath, "There's young Mr. Duberry, the barrister; I don't imagine his lordship *could* mind him—and he is always brilliant and amusing."

"What an angel you are, Tibbins!" says her ladyship, well pleased; "*of course*, he is just the man. Write a note at once, Tibbins—in the playful line, 'that her ladyship *insists*,' *et cetera*. Write it prettily, as you know how."

And there were not a few fluttering hearts, under white tarlatan bodices, that beat more quickly, and not a few young confiding eyes that flashed more brightly, when the well-known figure of Mr. Herbert Duberry ("a rising young barrister, I assure you, mamma,") appeared in the doorway of Lady Fitzscarum's crowded ball-room, one of the favourite and favoured partners of the night; for Bertie was a perfect dancer, and if his features were plain, he possessed (as all the young ladies said) the best figure in London. Even Dowagers and matrons smiled kindly on him; for he, as the girls affirmed, "was a rising man," and Alice, Edith, or Millicent, might do worse than "improve" a *deuxtemps* with him.

But Bertie's heart was tarlatan proof. It was far away, in a remote southern shire, although well-content to "bide its time." One drooping eyelash kissing the sweet cheek of his darling, was more to him than the perfumed tresses that waved by him in the dance, in the gay saloons of May Fair. His buoyant happy nature found

pleasure in such scenes, it is true; but no individual interest ever found its way into his breast, although more than one Belgravian damsel had laid siege to his heart, under the auspices of her Belgravian mamma.

He wrote to Bessie sometimes, and she to him; but there was nothing in his letters that might not have been written from a brother to a sister; and indeed it had been on the corner-stone of the assumed relationship that the friendship had been built. He gave her anecdotes of the London season, and of the London world, in which she had last season herself played no undistinguished part. She had, however, positively declined to spend another season under her aunt's chaperonage, although the Squire had urged it strongly upon her, for reasons at which the reader can guess.

Proud and masterful in his own house as he had once been, he was now afraid of the two opposite and contending elements which his domestic circle contained. He was afraid of his wife, and he was also, strange as it must seem to us who

who have known Bessie in her loving, childish moods, afraid of his daughter; and of them both together he was absolutely in awe.

"I never interfere with any of your arrangements, Harriet—God knows I never interfere," he would say deprecatingly to Mrs. Marchmont, when she represented to him the expediency of "getting Bessie away," as the approaching event drew near, and was even daily expected. "I only ask for peace and quiet; and as for persuading my girl to do anything contrary to her own inclination, it's a task which you may undertake if you like, but I wash my hands of it entirely. You saw how it was received when I mooted the subject the other day."

"It was not a question in my time of 'mooting subjects' between parent and children. It was 'do this' and 'do that.' I wish you would exert your authority in this instance."

But the Squire stood his ground firmly, out of the abundance of his weakness.

"Let her do what she likes best," he mut-

tered as he wandered feebly and nervously about the room; "perhaps she thinks she has a right."

Mrs. Marchmont's brow was black and threatening; but her bodily strength was not what it had been, and she really felt unequal to contention.

"Have the kindness to ring for my maid," she said at last; "and pray sit still if you can—the perpetual motion is *most* trying."

"To my nerves," she might have added; but, as we have seen, she chose to ignore the existence of nerves.

"I beg your pardon, my dear, I'm sure," answered the obedient husband, as he seated himself in an armchair, with a rueful expression of countenance; but was soon, from the force of habit recently acquired, swinging about the room again in a sort of nervous amble.

"I'm sure your master is going to have a fit," Mrs. Marchmont observed, in an aside to Mrs. Rigors, as she brought her coffee on a silver waiter; "his eyes look so odd."

There was, certainly, a strange look about

the Squire's face—the "old Squire," as people had already begun to call him within the last six months. Surely Bessie's heart must have softened towards him had she realised how much he had broken in mind, in spirits, in body, since he had placed his neck meekly under a second matrimonial yoke. But her heart was hardened towards the father who had treated her so cruelly, as she had taught herself to believe; and she looked with contemptuous pity on his meek submission to the termagant rule of his wife, and her own step-mother.

"Papa wishes me" (so she wrote to Bertie) "to go to Aunt Sophia again for the season"—how his heart bounded at the idea of meeting her, on what popular opinion had made the young barrister's own ground —"but" (a blow to his hopes in the next sentence) "nothing would induce me to leave Marchmont, now that it is so lovely in its spring dress. Then the people are getting so fond of me, and Uncle Rex and Joey could not spare me. No, I will not leave Marchmont, which is now dearer to me than

ever; but sometimes I wish, Bertie, that you would run down for a week or two, and see the improvements I have been making in my garden and wilderness. Joey is head gardener, and you can imagine what happy hours I spend in the dear spot. Can you tear yourself from town in the full swing of the season? If so, make that sacrifice for me, and confer one more obligation on

"Your affectionate

"BESSIE."

"Thank God! she does not sign herself 'sister,'" was the young man's fervent exclamation, as he pressed the very unsentimental document to his lips. "I will go down to Marchmont to-morrow."

CHAPTER XII.

"To say you are welcome, were superfluous."
SHAKESPEARE.

AS Mrs. Marchmont opened and read her letters at the breakfast-table the morning after her son had made the resolution recorded in the last chapter, she looked very much annoyed.

"It is too tiresome of that boy always to take one by surprise," she said peevishly to herself; and Bessie, for once deigning to take an interest in her step-mother's affairs, asked, with kindling eyes and a bright, happy flush—

"Is Bertie coming to-day, Mrs. Marchmont?"

Now human nature in some of its phases is so very perverse and contradictory, that

although it was the dearest wish of that lady's heart that her son should gain Bessie's affections, and ultimately "strengthen the connection between the families" by making her his wife, she could not cordially enter into the pleasure which the idea of his arrival had evidently caused. She said, looking very cross, and tossing the letter to Bessie across the table—

"You can see what he says, if you like; it is *most* inconvenient and ill-timed, this visit, and he gives me no opportunity of putting him off."

"That is a good thing," replied the young lady so addressed, in a quiet tone of voice, but with a gleam of triumph in her eyes, which were fixed full on her step-mother's face. "I do not think, in this instance, he would have been put off either, for it was I who asked him to come."

"Indeed! It seems to be the fashion now for young ladies to take the initiative. I am sure I ought to be flattered by the interest you so kindly take in my son."

There was covert satire lurking in this

speech, but Bessie gave no heed to it. "Whose teeth are spears and arrows, and whose tongue a sharp sword," was a fact which had long been realised by her, with regard to her enemy, and she was too genuinely glad at the thought of Bertie's speedy obedience to her wishes, to allow any bitter feeling room within her breast.

Directly after breakfast, she took her hat and book and went into her garden to spend the morning alone with her own happy thoughts. Her mind was beginning to recover its youthful elasticity, and her spirits were generally good. She had established many new interests, formed many new ties; and her nature, which was fitted to love and worship some image of its own creation, now bestowed that love and worship upon her beautiful home and its surroundings—the home of which she often assured herself no tyranny or caprice could deprive her. It was certainly a home to be proud of, as well as to love. Marchmont Hall was a fine old place, and had been in the family for centuries. There was that home-like air,

that tranquillity and repose about it, even in its magnificence, which no modern building can ever achieve. There wealth reigned without ostentation, luxury was wedded with comfort, and antiquity was not another word for gloom.

Few English homes were so perfect in their way, uniting the comfortable and the substantial with the more romantic attributes of the grand and the antique.

The gardens and pleasure-grounds were extensive and exquisitely kept, but the favourite retreat of the young mistress had always been what she had named her "own garden" or wilderness, where nature and art had been allowed to work together hand in hand, and where the results were generally considered to do equal credit to Bessie's taste and executive powers, for the whole arrangement had been planned and carried out under her immediate supervision.

In the centre of the flower-garden, which gleamed amidst the bracken and gorse, set in the short common turf, which the

Higher Downs had supplied, a fountain splashed and glittered in the sun. This had been Bessie's pride and *chef-d'œuvre*, and the gold-fishes, which held their court in the marble basin thereof, were her peculiar and constant care. She had of late, with the Colonel's encouragement and permission, inducted "Joey" into the position of head gardener in her own particular domain, and great was the boy's pride and delight when his services were required either to weed, to dig, to plant, or to train the roses and honeysuckles under the direction of the young mistress, whom he adored.

On that morning, one of the brightest and the finest in the jocund month of May, he had been busy about the cherished spot; and a beautiful nosegay, very tastefully arranged, had been carefully placed by him on the rim of the marble basin, on which Miss Marchmont always sat for half an hour or more, while she watched and fed her golden favourites, disporting themselves in the water below. It was a delicate atten-

tion on the part of the lad, which always touched her more or less; and on this particular morning, when her heart was unusually alive to genial and sunny influences, it brought the tears into her eyes.

"I have some few things left in the world to love and care for," she whispered to herself.

There was no fear of interruption there, for the boy, with native delicacy, always employed himself in a remote part of the garden when Miss Marchmont made it her morning retreat; and she could there forget the frictions and the pin-pricks of daily annoyances and contradictions, and hug to herself the idea that nothing should ever part her from a home and a spot of which she grew daily more enamoured, and which seemed, in the absence of human sympathy, to twine itself round her very heart-strings.

But, unknown as the fact was to herself, her nature had never been riper for the full and keen enjoyment of that fond communion of the soul which forms the elysium of lovers; and when she believed herself most

secure against its inroads, the presence of love was taking up its abode in her breast. That she was blind to the fact, could not have received a more striking proof than that conveyed in her own open invitation to the object of it, "to come down to Marchmont for a few days, to *oblige* her."

She looked down, as she imagined, from such a lofty height on the passions and emotions of poor frail human nature, she could safely play about the candle without injury to her tender wings; and it was kinder to Bertie to establish an easy footing at once. The yearnings of her heart towards him, and for his re-assuring genial presence at her side, she believed she would have entertained as his sister. Double and treble were the folds that were bound about the beautiful eyes; for in such cases we are never in greater danger than when we believe ourselves to be most secure.

The hours flew so fast by in that delicious retreat, spent in the companionship of a favourite author, that the luncheon bell sounded before Bessie had believed it pos-

sible that it could be twelve o'clock. Still she lingered; the calm and the quiet of the shady spot, broken only by the melodious notes of the missel-thrush and the blackbird, and the gentle splashing of the fountain, were inexpressibly grateful to her; and she disliked returning to the house, where something was continually happening to put her out of tune with herself and her surroundings.

"I will send Joey up for my luncheon," she said to herself, "go for a saunter in the park afterwards, and at four Bertie will be here."

Her mind was evidently dwelling upon the expected arrival, and she did not wish to expose herself to the taunts and sneers of her step-mother, by making her pleasure apparent, or to the *gêne* of concealing so natural a feeling; for, with the exception of one of the Deanery girls, occasionally invited on her account, Bessie never saw a creature of her own age of either sex.

"I feel a hundred years old," she used to

say to Uncle Rex sometimes; and she really was unfeignedly glad that Bertie was coming down to Marchmont, and not a little secretly flattered at his speedy obedience to her summons.

She ate her frugal luncheon by the side of the fountain, sharing the meal with the goldfishes, playing with the water, and making cups for it out of the palms of her white hands, with the carelessness and *abandon* of a child. She had been more like herself for the last few weeks than she had been since the ride with Bertie, when her nerves had sustained the shock which, linked in her mind so closely with the fatal coincidence of Reggie's death, had made her almost superstitiously alive to outward impressions. Her mind was recovering its tone, and, in spite of her step-mother, in spite of the altered circumstances of her home, she was beginning to resume, with those she loved, that playfulness of manner which had constituted one of her greatest charms.

If she did not care for Bertie, or was

never likely to do so, that young man was doing a very rash and foolhardy thing in coming down to Marchmont to beguile the leisure hours of the wayward, but singularly attractive girl. Better for him would it have been to have remained amidst those gauds and sunflowers of May Fair, who called him "*the* Duberry" amongst themselves, and before whom the splendour and glamour of even a guardsman's glory had been known to dwindle and turn pale.

But these prudent considerations had no place in the council-chambers of his heart, and before nine o'clock the same morning he had taken a ticket for the express train to the West, and was soon literally flying down to Marchmont, as though he knew by intuition that Bessie was waiting for him with beaming eyes and flushing cheeks, and that the key in which her whole being had been set that day was the one of which we have caught the echo in the words, "and at four Bertie will be here."

True to her resolution, she sauntered about the park glades, and down the chestnut

walk which formed the short cut for a pedestrian to the house.

"He will walk from the station," she thought, "and Johnson will take the dog-cart for his things."

The sound of a horse galloping behind her caused her to look round, and one of the grooms, mounted on Lancelot, dashed past her, touching his hat, but not attempting to draw rein, or to communicate to her the cause of his haste.

"Rather cool to take Lancelot," Bessie observed to herself aloud, a habit she had lately fallen into, perhaps from the absence of any genial companion of her own age. She was, however, in too happy a frame of mind to resent even that indignity long; and as she heard the distant whistle which announced the arrival of the train at the little outlying station, which had been built solely with a view to the accommodation of the Hall, a quick throb of pleasure agitated her pulses, and sent the blood into her cheeks, which were beginning to recover the tender contour of health, combined with the inex-

pressible bloom and charm of early youth.

"He is come!" she whispered to herself. How she would once have laughed to scorn the idea that those words with regard to Herbert Duberry could have caused her the keen sensation of pleasure which she realized at that moment, with the short sentence breathing between her eager expectant lips—"He is come!"

CHAPTER XIII.

"Next came the loveliest pair in all the ring,
Sweet female beauty hand in hand with spring."
BURNS.

THE greater part of Bertie's journey westward had been performed alone, but at Bristol a gentleman and lady got into the same carriage with him, whom he recognized as belonging to the Marchmont neighbourhood. They did not seem to know him, and he entertained a natural objection to introduce and explain himself; but when the conversation took a more personal turn with regard to the affairs of those with whom he was intimately connected, he wished he had done so in the first instance, and that his companions had been prudent enough not to talk so unreservedly before a stranger, put-

ting him in the unpleasant position of an unwilling eavesdropper.

There are two classes of people one meets with, travelling by train; the unnaturally silent and reserved, and the boisterously open and familiar. Of the latter class were the couple who entered Bertie's carriage. They were essentially comfortable people, a middle-aged couple, without encumbrances, and evidently very good company to one another—for they laughed and joked, and exchanged mild witticisms, with the *laisser-aller* of a youthful, newly-married pair. The substantial luncheon which was handed to them, as the bell rang the warning note, by a magnificent flunkey, all over tags, and blooming in new plush, was freely discussed without any of those glances in the direction of an unoffending stranger, which are the certain and unwelcome herald of the extended parcel of limp sandwiches, for his acceptance, which he sickens at the sight of, and which courtesy forbids him to decline.

Bertie was spared this, and looked up re-

lieved from his newspaper when the neat basket, with its two covers, had been finally packed away, when the jewelled fingers of the lady had gathered every stray crumb into a little pyramid, in the centre of her be-laced pocket-handkerchief, and when she had finally shaken that article daintily out of the carriage window.

"That was very refreshing," she observed, in loud, honest, *debonaire*, but not vulgar accents, to her companion, evidently her husband. "Travelling always does make me so hungry—and I'm not ashamed to own it."

"Why should you be, my dear. It's a sign of a good conscience to have a fair appetite for one's meals; and then you never eat a breakfast—not what *I* call a breakfast, at least."

"I should be sorry to eat what you call a breakfast, Dick. Let me see, what was it this morning?" and she began to count off on her fingers—"one sausage-roll—four slices of ham—a grilled leg of a fowl——"

"There, there, Julia; that will do," said

the jolly, good-tempered-looking man, laughing all over his face, in appreciation of this mild chaff, and making a comic face to indicate the presence of a stranger. "I am not quite such a cormorant as you would make me out."

"You don't look as if you lived upon air, either, my dear. Why, you must ride as heavy—as—as the 'old Squire,' as they begin to call him now. How that man is aged!"

"He is, indeed—and no wonder, I was going to say; but that would not have been the most polite speech in the world, would it, my dear?"

"I am sorry for his daughter; she is a good, pretty girl," said the lady, without answering the last observation, "it must be a terrible state of suspense for her to be in. If there should be an heir, she will be cut out of everything. I cannot fancy anything more mortifying; and she has been looked upon as the heiress so long."

Bertie could not help hearing these remarks; and, although no names had been

mentioned, his attention had been painfully on the alert, to the hint conveyed in the last sentence; and, as a lightning flash which does not last for a second, gives in that second a scene in its entirety, so the short sentence, "if there should be an heir," seemed in a moment to illuminate the dark places in the young man's mind, and he understood Bessie's precarious position with regard to the inheritance in an instant. The conversation, he knew by instinct, referred to her and his family affairs; and various little circumstances that had combined to mystify him, now flashed back upon his memory, solved and explained.

I must not here be misunderstood. The *inheritance*, which, combined with the charms of the young heiress, had not been altogether without its attractions to the ambitious young soldier who had first gained Bessie's affections, was less than nothing to Bertie, as regarded the prospect of his own future participation in it. But he knew the proud spirit well, and that the blow which such an event would entail

upon her would be one of crushing weight —one which would materially affect her whole future.

He found himself under these circumstances listening eagerly for a *name*. It was possible that he might have been mistaken after all. It was very unlikely, he consoled himself by thinking, that his mother would have kept the expected event secret, which would place her in a position of increased importance.

"I wonder she does not go up to town for the best advice," the lady went on; "she is not younger than you, and they tell me she is horribly nervous."

"Humph! It would be a good thing for Miss Marchmont if—I don't mean that exactly; but I don't suppose she would much care—there is no love lost in that quarter, I fancy."

"I beg your pardon," said a voice which Bertie scarcely recognised as his own, breaking his silence with an effort, but determined to put a stop to a conversation which he could scarcely listen to honourably, and the

purport of which had driven the blood backward into his heart on more accounts than one. "I beg your pardon, but I am intimately acquainted—connected, rather, with the family whose name you sir, have just mentioned. I am sure you will spare me the pain of farther discussion; and you will allow me to say that I believe it to have been caused by perfect inadvertence on your part."

"It is for me to apologize, I am sure," answered the jolly gentleman, looking quite sheepish and crestfallen, and glancing at his wife, who appeared to be the stronger vessel, and on whom he evidently was accustomed to rely on occasions requiring readiness and presence of mind.

"I am sure the gentleman will believe we were quite unaware that what we were saying would wound the feelings of any one present," the lady replied with great self-possession; while his companion thumped his umbrella three times on the ground with great vehemence, and repeated,

"Quite unaware, sir—quite unaware, I assure you."

"I have not the slightest doubt of it," the young man answered kindly.

The worthy couple seemed greatly annoyed, and fortunately the distance they had to traverse in one another's company was rapidly coming to an end. At the station before the one at Marchmont, a large barouche, drawn by a substantial pair of roan horses, was waiting; and no one could have looked at the carriage, and then at the lady and gentleman on the platform, without connecting them with each other in their own minds, so great was the family resemblance pervading the whole turn-out.

The current of Herbert Duberry's thoughts had undergone a change, and he sat absent and moody in the corner of the carriage, almost hoping that some impossible contingency might occur, either to carry him past, or to stop him short of that spot which it appeared he was never to visit under agreeable or promising auspices.

"It cannot be true," he muttered half aloud to himself, as a loud and peculiarly shrill whistle recalled him to the necessity of collecting his scattered thoughts and his effects preparatory to protruding his head from the window, and enforcing upon a stupid-looking porter, who was blinking in the sun, the necessity of immediately releasing him from his prison-house, and eliciting from him the fact that the dog-cart was in attendance to convey his things to the "'All."

"All right; I shall walk," was the reply, accompanied by a shilling, which the lazy porter had done nothing to earn; but Bertie, like most young men with limited allowances, was "very free" with his cash. It was his nature to give; whether morally or in baser metal, his *largesse* was always liberally dispensed. He was a "radiator," and possessed the gift of imparting, which was the secret of his success in society. As he stepped lightly along, he could not help comparing the fragrance of the country in

its "spring dress," to the stifling atmosphere of the town he had just quitted.

"Bessie was right," he said to himself; "this is true enjoyment—how lovely the place is looking!"

It was indeed a most charming walk from the little rural station by the footpath to the Hall, and the charm of it was not decreased, in Bertie's estimation, by the distant glimpse of white draperies, which he knew could belong to no other than the lady of his love herself.

"It cannot be true," was his first thought, as he recognised Bessie's favourite little terrier, Spring, who came bounding forward in advance of his mistress, to testify with much demonstration his welcome to the favoured guest. His sleek, sagacious head was doubtless cognizant of the fact that there were not many whom his mistress would thus have condescended to honour. He threw himself, in the excess of his joy, with such force against Bertie, that he rebounded like a India-rubber ball, had to pick himself up, and go through the same ceremony

again and again with such rapidity, that he appeared to be playing at ball with himself against the person of the individual welcomed.

"How pleased Spring is to see you!" said a sweet, low voice at last; for Bertie in vain made efforts to subdue his exuberance, that he might enjoy uninterrupted a welcome from the lips he loved best in the world.

Was it only Spring who was glad, Bessie? If so, those tell-tale blushes, and those drooping eyelids were telling a deceiving tale. Bertie noted them with a quick, eager gaze, and a less sanguine nature than his might have gathered hope and encouragement from the same signs.

"Are you a little glad too?"

"I am *very* glad," Bessie answered quietly. "I have missed you very much since you went away after Christmas."

"Do not make me too conceited. If you have 'a breath to blow away this praise,' do it at once. I feel that there must be one coming."

"Do not cast the shadow of uncertain

evils," she answered, laughing. "You see, I can cap your quotation, and so get out of the difficulty. There is no great praise in saying we were dull without you. We have lived but a humdrum sort of life of late, but *you* are leaving the gay world for us, and we ought to feel complimented accordingly."

"You know very well how I am circumstanced, Bessie; and since we are in a poetic vein, I think I may aptly quote the words of the greatest of all poets in my estimation, when he says—

> 'I cannot lose a world for thee,
> But would not lose thee for a world.'"

"We are getting too high-flown and transcendental; but one thing I do believe, Bertie," the young girl said earnestly, and in her own natural manner, "that you would do more for me than any one else in the world, excepting Uncle Rex—and I have not many friends."

Bertie made no reply; he was deeply moved, but there was something in Bessie's

manner, frank and candid as it was, and full of honest, sisterly affection, which made him tremble for the success of his suit. He had made up his mind to cast the die during that visit. There was nothing to wait for—no friend's cause to betray; and as for himself, he had loved Bessie from the first moment he had seen her, and his love had since deepened and strengthened, until it had become a part of his very being. At last he spoke.

"Nothing that I could ever do would repair one great wrong done to you. I have often wished to tell you, but have never had the opportunity, that it was entirely contrary to my wish, and against my repeated entreaties, that—that your home has been made what it is."

"It was papa's fault—papa's doing, of course," Bessie answered quickly, and with a heightened colour; and then, with an irresistible inclination to take a humorous view of the affair, she added: "Both our parents were very disobedient—very undu-

tiful, no doubt, but certainly papa was the worst—he sacrificed *me*. It was very cruel——"

The sentence remained unfinished. The mounted groom passed them on his way back to the Hall. Lancelot was all in a lather; and Miss Marchmont was exceedingly displeased.

"Just ask him where he has been, please, and also why he took Lancelot?—it is a liberty I don't allow. Where have you been?—and by whose orders did you take out that horse?" she herself asked, calling after the man, and not giving her companion time to obey her injunction.

"Been for Mr. Mavors, if you please, miss; and my orders was from the Squire;" and touching his hat, the man soon disappeared, leaving Bessie chafing at the indignity offered to her horse, in sending him on casual messages, that any of the grooms' horses might have discharged as well.

"I really won't stand that!" she observed to Bertie—"it is quite a sign of the times. Papa would no more have let them take

poor old Meggie, when and where it suited them, than he would have flown. And to bring Lancelot back in that condition is a thing he would once have discharged any servant for. I can't understand it."

"Perhaps some one is ill," suggested Bertie, anxious to soothe Bessie's ruffled equanimity, and to restore her to her former gracious mood. But he did not entirely succeed. She had lived from her cradle amongst people who made mighty matters of comparative trifles; and although her own nature naturally ran in a larger groove, it was pliable enough to mould and adapt itself in a great measure to those with whom she was in habitual contact. She was at that time much more like what her father had been when we first knew him, than he could be said to be, to his former self. Antagonism had brought out the wayward and domineering traits in her character; and winning and loveable as she was to those who loved her, I cannot claim for my heroine the negative quality of "amiable" at this epoch of her life.

The two young people were comparatively silent during the rest of the walk; and as they approached the house, Bessie rather pettishly complained of the heat, and taking off her hat, swung it by the strings to and fro in her hand, as they entered the shade of the chestnut walk. The picture she thus presented—her beautifully-shaped head, crowned with its rich brown plaits; her lithe and slender figure, agile and graceful as that of a deer (an animal to which she might have been aptly compared); the arched Andalusian foot, which pressed so firmly the green sward, became engraved on the mind's eye of her companion, so that for years afterwards, when he thought of her, it was, as far as the outward image went, as he saw her then.

CHAPTER XIV.

"Come what sorrows can,
It cannot countervail the exchange of joy
That one short moment gives me in her sight."

Romeo.

PANIC and confusion had reigned paramount at the Hall during the hours Bessie had passed by herself in her own lovely retreat, in thinking of the happiness she promised herself in Bertie's expected arrival.

Mrs. Marchmont had been taken ill about the middle of the day, and the mounted messenger, who had passed Miss Marchmont on her walk towards the station, had been hastily despatched for Mr. Mavors, the nearest doctor; for owing to the wilful and fatal obstinacy of the lady, few of the usual

necessary preparations had been made, and her day of trial and of unnatural overwhelming dread came upon her, as it were, unawares.

"Do not be eternally ringing my death knell," she would say to Mrs. Rigors, the only person in the household bold enough to venture upon the topic at all; and so the subject had been ignored by common consent, until forced upon the attention of those most vitally concerned in the issue of events, by the serious illness of the mistress of the house, and the nervous tremour, and consequent extreme irritability, of the Squire.

He had given so many contradictory orders, in the space of a few minutes, that Mrs. Rigors had at last taken the responsibility upon her own shoulders; and when we consider how great a stake was trembling in the balances, with regard to her own future position at the Hall, we shall not be inclined to put her extreme anxiety, and energy in her mistress's behalf, entirely to the score of her loving and faithful attachment to the lady personally. It was she

who had given orders, taken, indeed, from the Squire's mouth, that the fastest horse in the stable should be despatched for the doctor; it was she who hastened down the village, without bonnet or shawl, to fetch the nurse whose services her own sagacity had secured; it was she who spoke strong, sustaining words of comfort to the terrified woman, who was frightening herself to death under the spell of superstition, that had struck its roots into her heart.

The gipsy had foretold that in the height and zenith of her fortune, late attained, a great danger would threaten her. That she would have two children, but only be the *living* mother of one.

The circumstance which many would have believed to have been the crowning success of all, the circumstance which threatened the present heiress with the loss of her inheritance, and held out such brilliant hopes and prospects to the possible mother of a future heir, was the poisoned drop in the fountain, of the cup of one whom I have called little better than an adventuress, and

whose all was staked upon the coming throw. The game had lost its interest at the very turning-point of destiny. She would have given up everything—cancelled the marriage vow—torn asunder the "handsome settlements"—broken the wedding-ring, and even have meekly abdicated the position of Mistress of Marchmont, with her heel on the neck of her enemies, to have escaped the coming terror of the next few hours. Even Bessie, could she have read her stepmother's heart at that moment, would have acknowledged herself avenged; for the cold drops which stood out upon her brow like beads were not the result of physical pain, but of that mental anguish which no words are powerful enough to portray.

"I shall die—I shall die!" she kept repeating; "I have known it all along. Oh! Bertie, if I had but listened to you! I should have been happy in poverty with you—and now I must die—I feel it. Oh! Rigors, hold my hands."

Those warm, white, cruel hands, which

had crushed all the eager hopes of the happiness of requited affections of one young life, now clutched for human support, and human sympathy, in a menial's grasp. The *husband* had withdrawn terrified from the apartment. Her son had not yet arrived; the very event which had filled her own soul with terror would be the means of alienating, and putting farther from her than ever, the step-daughter, whom she had hated, and whose happiness she had tried to crush. She had no one to cling to, no one into whose ear she could pour the anguish which consumed her, but a hired dependant, whom she had bought with heavy bribes, and who would have deserted her the next moment for a larger retaining fee. So well did her mistress understand her, that in the midst of her distress she took a crisp twenty-pound note, from among a roll of many such which she kept in her despatch box, "just to look at sometimes," as she observed to herself, and for the pleasure of experiencing the sensation of having money enough, and to spare, and "to realize," as she would some-

times latterly, bitterly express herself, "*her price.*"

"You will take care of me, Rigors," she said, almost fawningly, as she pressed the paper into her hand. "If I get over it you shall have the rest; only *seem* as if you cared for me a little now."

The woman in reply pressed the trembling hand to her own lips.

"You will get over it, poor dear," she said, stroking it as caressingly as it was in her nature to do. "We shall make our young heiress sing rather small, when she comes to know of the son and heir, I take it. It has been very well managed, and she has not the slightest suspicion as yet."

"I think, Rigors, that I had better see a clergyman. I should like to see Mr. Kingdom," she went on, with feverish eagerness; "It will not do to die like a dog. I will see him now, before I get worse. I have something on my mind, Rigors, that I want to confess. Let him be sent for at once."

"What! and make all the people think

that you are going to die, and no mistake? No, no, we don't want any parsons here yet —we'll wait for the christening for that."

This was said with a sort of grim attempt at playfulness, which the contact of her palm with the crisp twenty-pound note elicited from Mrs. Rigors, and which, clumsy as it was, had rather a soothing effect upon her mistress, for the time being.

"Well, perhaps not now—not yet. But remember, Rigors, if I should be very ill—if I should be in danger, I wish to have Mr. Kingdom sent for at once. I cannot die with a great sin upon my soul."

"Who's talking of dying? Come, I want you to cheer up a little. I want you to look at this." And suddenly opening the door of the dressing-room, Mrs. Rigors exposed to view a most elegant Berceaunette, trimmed with lace and blue ribbons, which it had been the abigail's pride and pleasure to prepare, in anticipation of the advent of the infant, which she had never allowed herself to believe for an instant could possibly prove

other than the "son and heir" so looked for.

Mrs. Marchmont, whose face was whiter than the snowy dressing-wrapper in which she was draped, shuddered visibly. "The living mother of only *one*," she muttered, between her set teeth. "Shut the door—don't let me see it," she added, while her voice quavered with terror, and the ashy paleness of her features alarmed the lady's-maid, who rang violently, to summon the nurse, while she prayed fervently in her own mind that the doctor would speedily follow on the messenger's steps, who had brought word that Mr. Mavors would be in attendance immediately.

To the care of these professionals we must consign the terror-stricken woman, while we return to the pair we left in the chestnut walk, and of whom one, at least, was entirely unprepared for the news which would greet her on her return to the Hall.

"Why, there is the doctor coming," she observed to Bertie, as they emerged into the carriage-drive, and met Mr. Mavors almost

face to face. "You are right. What if it should be papa!"

The young girl's cheek paled, and she seized Bertie's arm. "Go and ask him what it is—I can't."

In obedience to her wishes, Bertie advanced several steps, out of her ear-shot, to meet the doctor, who was riding in the direction of the Hall, and did not seem inclined to draw rein.

"What is the matter, doctor?" he asked, almost clutching at the bridle; for he, too, had a vital interest in the question, and one of which the conversation he had overheard in the train had made him partly aware. "Is anyone ill at the Hall?"

"It is your mother, Mrs. Marchmont, sir. Of course you are aware of the cause."

"I am afraid I am—but," he added, in a low voice, "Miss Marchmont is not. We must keep it from her until it is over, if we can."

"The matter must be left in your hands," Mr. Mavors coldly replied. "I have no-

thing to do but with my patient. Good morning, sir."

Bertie's plan of action was immediately taken. It *must* be kept from her for the present," he said hastily to himself; and with a strong effort at self-control he turned back calmly to meet Bessie, saying,

"It is not the Squire, but my mother who is indisposed."

"It must be since the morning, then; Mrs. Marchmont appeared as well as usual at breakfast. I am sorry," she added, with an effort; for, after all, she *was* his mother, and it was due to him to express some sympathy in the anxiety which it was natural he should feel; "but I don't think you need be alarmed."

"I hope not," he answered; but his manner was absent and distracted; and the young girl, keenly alive to any divided devotion or interest in those who professed allegiance to her, was not slow to resent it.

"You had better hasten on and satisfy your anxiety," she immediately observed.

"Do not think of me, I cannot walk faster, it is so overpoweringly hot."

"I should not think of leaving you, Bessie."

"You are very kind," was the cold reply; "but I am well accustomed to my own company; and I should be grieved to detain you, as a matter of mere politeness. No doubt your mother is anxiously expecting you. Pray go on."

"Do not be unkind, Bessie—I have no intention of going on, no wish to see my mother, or any one but yourself at Marchmont; and that you know only too well, when you use the knowledge to wound me to the quick, as you do when you say such things. Bear with me a little, or banish me altogether; but do not trifle with me, for I cannot bear it. If my presence annoys you, say so, and I will relieve you of it at once."

Bessie had never seen him angry before; and, womanlike, she cared for him at that moment more than she had ever cared for him before; but she only raised her eye-

brows into a very becoming arch as she said mockingly,

"A quarrel, Bertie, and between such tried and sober friends as ourselves! Why, you will persuade me we are growing young again, if anything will."

"No—we can scarcely afford to quarrel. Promise me one thing, Bessie—that whatever may happen, it shall not interfere with our friendship—if you like, though it is but a cold word between us, after all."

"Why, what is likely to happen more than has happened, to test it? Bertie, you need scarcely ask me that question, I think."

"God only knows!" was the solemn reply; and then there was a silence between them for a brief space, which Bessie, whose mind was freer from anxiety than that of her companion, was the first to break.

"Did you think papa much altered the last time you were here?" she asked, abruptly turning the subject—at least, so it seemed to Bertie, who could think but of

one. "Uncle Rex has been frightening me about him, and it was that which gave me such a shock when I saw the doctor galloping down the road."

"The Squire is certainly a good deal aged; but he appeared hale and hearty enough, I thought, at Christmas."

"Uncle says he is not—that he is breaking—I cannot bear the word. I wanted you to comfort me, Bertie, for papa and I have not been very good friends of late; and I should be wretched if I thought he was ill."

"I think I may safely re-assure you on that score—it often happens that men who up to a certain period have looked very young of their age, get old suddenly."

"That is true; but I don't like to hear them call him 'the old Squire,' as I know by instinct they do."

"It seems curious at first, perhaps," Bertie answered, for he could not help reverting in thought to the sentence he had just so inopportunely overheard, "for they call him

the old Squire now;" and he could not with truth contradict the assertion.

"Do you think I have behaved badly to papa?"

"You? In what way do you mean? You never behave badly to anyone, that I know of."

"Just now you accused me of behaving ill to you."

"Did I?"

"Certainly you did; if I can behave badly to you, I suppose it just possible that I can behave badly to anyone else."

"Possible, perhaps, but not probable."

"Miserable evasion! Why, Bertie, I shall not know you in a flattering mood."

"Truth must take the shape of flattery when dealing with you; but seriously, I think Uncle Rex is *for once* in the wrong."

"Why do you lay that satirical stress on the words? I shall begin to think you are jealous of Uncle Rex."

"I only wish you would give me cause."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply what I say. I should be too

much honoured by being allowed to enter the lists with him for your favour."

"Nonsense," Bessie replied, swinging her hat so vehemently that the ribbon came off. It was of a pretty tender pink, like the inside of a sea-shell. Bertie said quietly,

"Give it to me."

The truth was, he was dallying with his fate. If the crisis he dreaded was actually close, it would be better to meet it, in time to save the tender unconscious head from the blow which awaited it.

"If she loves me," he argued with himself, "she will be comforted, even if it should prove an heir;" but he had not fathomed the depth of Bessie's nature when he made this mental boast. It was one which threw out strong roots and interlacing tendrils, which must be torn in every fibre before they would yield up possession of that to which they had been trained to cling. She gave him the ribbon with a careless and winning grace.

"How many more of them have you in the little old desk in Lincoln's Inn?" she

asked with a smile, for he had told her the history of that desk in one of his letters; and of all the treasures it contained, among others, a tiny white glove, which belonged to a cousin for whom he entertained a boyish passion, and a lock of silky dark hair. The question partook more of the nature which Bertie would gladly have had all such questions partake of—the spirit of coquetry, which showed that he was not altogether indifferent to her, as a man. It was a question which a sister would not have asked of a brother, and herein it was consoling.

"I have no more of them; it is, it shall be unique. The owner of the little glove and silky curl is not a living rival, Bessie."

"Rival! It is an unknown word in my vocabulary." The word was echoed with playful mockery. "A *rival* must be an *impossibility* in any heart which was occupied by *my* unworthy image."

"Nature has provided against that contingency," Bertie replied gravely, "in your case; but would you admit of the reverse?

Could you be true to one whose sole merit was in that image worship? Or would you prove an iconoclast, even to your own cost?"

"I do not understand you. An iconoclast is a breaker of images, is he not?"

"Certainly; and one who destroys the shrine in which an image is contained, can scarcely fail to destroy the image at one and the same moment. Do you see the natural conclusion?"

For sole reply Bessie blushed deeply; and answered at last impulsively,

"I have long ceased to hope to meet with such a shrine; mine has been broken and shattered long ago."

"Do not misinterpret me—there exists one still. Bessie, I have come down here for the sole purpose of ascertaining if you can hold out any hope."

"Of what?"

"Of ever being mine—my wife."

"Do not ask me—not now—not yet. It would be wicked in me to promise to be your wife as long as I have no heart to give.

Let us put love of that sort out of the question—it is only another word for sorrow; and, Bertie, I do like you so *very*, *very* much!"

It was the old childish manner again that galled while it fascinated him, because it was so uncongenial with the passion that burned in his own breast.

"Darling," he answered, impulsively, "if you were a child—if we were both children—that answer might satisfy me; but as a woman's answer to a man who has staked his all upon the die, it has rather an empty sound."

"You do not care for my friendship—for my very warm regard, then? It is all I have to give."

"Are you sure that you know your own heart? Is this to be my final answer?"

"Why do you press me so hard just now, Bertie? Is nothing ever to grow up again?—are our feelings and sentiments to come into the world full-grown?"

She little knew why he pressed her, as she called it, "so hard"—she little knew

why he wished her to pronounce the irrevocable word just then. At any other time the sweet suggestion which her words conveyed would have made a man of him, but at that particular crisis they had almost a contrary effect. He could not afford to wait for that slow growth at which she hinted.

"It shall be as you like," he answered sadly. "It will make no difference to my love, and I have no right that you should consult my happiness; only remember that my motto with regard to you will be still our family motto, '*semper eadem*,' always the same."

A sudden impulse moved Bessie to put her own hand for a moment into his.

"Thank you, Bertie," she said, her eyes glistening as she spoke; "there are few friends of whom *that* can be said with any truth."

CHAPTER XV.

"For ever, Fortune, wilt thou prove
An unrelenting foe to love:
And, when we meet a mutual heart,
Come in between, and bid us part."

THOMSON.

"Behind her Death,
Close following pace for pace, not mounted yet
On his pale horse."

MILTON.

THEY entered the house together—the house over which an unnatural stillness seemed to have fallen like a cloud; but Bessie did not observe it. She ran lightly upstairs to her own room, and turning the key in the lock (an unnecessary precaution, for no one was likely to intrude upon her privacy then), sat down to think—to analyse her own heart and feelings with regard to the real nature and attach-

ment, which she did not now attempt to conceal from herself, that she entertained for Bertie Duberry. Could she ever love him as she had loved Reginald? If not, was she doing right in giving him the hope implied in her last speech, which had risen unawares to her lips, and escaped them before she had realised all that they must inevitably suggest to a mind "wax to receive, and marble to retain," the smallest grain of hope from such a quarter.

She sat pondering over these things until it was time to dress for dinner; and then it suddenly occurred to her, that as her stepmother had been indisposed enough to send for the doctor, it was quite possible she would think it consistent to keep up the character of an invalid, by dining in her own room. The idea had its effect in hastening Bessie's toilette preparations.

"It will be so nice," she thought, "to have Bertie all to ourselves;" and shaking her long beautiful hair over her shoulders, she rang the bell for Lucy to weave it up again; while, as was her custom during the

operation, she read some favourite author. Her head bent over her book, and a happy, contented smile, just parted her pretty lips.

Miss Marchmont did not at first perceive the nervous tremour of the hands, which bungled in unwonted clumsiness over their accustomed task, or the total absence of colour from Lucy's cheeks, who looked very much as if she had seen a ghost. When her mistress did catch a glimpse of her face over her shoulder in the glass (the favourite author was not quite so absorbing as usual) she was startled at the appearance it presented.

"Goodness, Lucy!" she exclaimed, "what is the matter?—are you ill?"

"No, Miss Bessie, I'm not ill, but it's a wonder that I'm not, I am sure—what with the worrit here—and all the servants on at me, for being so cruel not to tell you, Miss—and there—why should I tell you more than another, the news that'll break your heart a'most."

"What can you mean, Lucy? I must

beg for an explanation at once," replied Miss Marchmont with dignity, to these disjointed and incoherent remarks on the part of her maid. "I know of no news you have to tell that will be likely to affect me as you suppose. Speak out, Lucy, and do not deal in mystery and prevarication, like the rest of the world. What is it you have to tell me?"

"Oh! Miss Bessie! It was cruel to have kep' it from yon. Mrs. Marchmont is going to have a child, and they do say it's sure to be a son and heir. I don't know whatever will become of the old set if it is—things was bad enough before—but now—why, Miss, the doctor and the nurse are in the house."

A change as gradual as the conviction, came over Bessie's face, now upturned towards the speaker, a shower of dark tresses still hanging loosely over her neck and breast. It had the appearance of gradually setting itself into stone, and the lips still parted, but no longer mobile, flexible and tender, looked rigid as though the seal of

death had been stamped on them; while the coral hues of warmly breathing life which had animated them died into grey. The book dropped from her hands to the floor, and Lucy, mechanically stooping to pick it up, took the opportunity of touching the cold, impassive hand which hung at her young mistress's side. The touch made Bessie start with a shudder from the contact. She was dead at that moment to any human sympathy or comfort.

"Leave me, Lucy," she said, passionately. "Do not stay here to mock me, and to have your tale of wonderment to carry into the servants' hall. You *knew* of this, and you have deceived me. *You* who have always professed to love me—you have deceived me the most."

"Oh! Miss Bessie," said the poor girl, weeping bitterly. "I would never have deceived you, if I could have helped it; but we none of us dared to tell you. And now," she added, "the poor lady is *so* ill. They say it will go hard with her.

Oh! Miss Bessie, try to forgive her, if you can."

"Go, Lucy; why do you disobey me? I wish to be alone," was her young mistress's cold reply to the weeping girl, who hastened from the room.

When in the stillness and silence of her own chamber—the chamber sacred to the memory of her departed mother—Bessie gave herself up to the full expression of the angry despair which was literally tearing her heart and shaking her being to the centre. Passionately she flung herself upon the ground, tossing back the silky, disordered locks, with her bare arms, with a smothered cry.

"Why was I born?" she said. "Why did God give me a human heart and human affections, only to break and deface them, and root out His image from my soul? Why does He let this woman put her foot upon my neck? And I was questioning my own heart whether or not I loved her son! *Her* son! If he were an angel from heaven, I would trample him under foot!" And raising herself from her prone

position, she suited the action to the word, and stamped her foot angrily on the ground. Then, flinging herself into a chair, in the *abandon* of her grief, she tried hard to think.

"The doctor and the nurse are in the house,"—the words of Lucy still rang in her unwilling ears—"and they do say it's sure to be a son and heir."

"And why do they say so, but to spite me, to wound me, to *kill* me?" she added aloud. "And then to have been deceived throughout. I will leave this place for ever—I will never see it again! The only thing that was left to me—the only thing that I care for in the world—and for her to triumph over me—that is the sharpest sting of all!"

Like the deep sobbings of an angry child were those which now shook her frame, and the tears which fell thick and fast from her eyes, could only have been wrung from her proud heart by some wound which had suddenly pierced into the quick.

The usual hour for dinner had long passed by, no bell had rung, and Bessie herself had not been summoned; a solemn stillness seemed to pervade the whole house. She grew tired of her lonely watch, and the strength of her passion had subsided like the fury of a spent storm. Suddenly she determined to dress and go down.

"They shall see no difference," she said aloud, as she bathed in cold water her tear-stained face, and smoothed into order the masses of her dishevelled hair. "But," she added, gazing at the reflected image of her own face in the glass, and smiling to see that it was still fair, "I will let Bertie see and know this very evening that it is all over between us. I have suffered, and why should not he? I have been wounded—why should not I wound? Another week, another day, perhaps, thrown into his society, and I might have pledged myself irrevocably, but now it must be all over for ever between us."

Slowly she descended the oak staircase, glimmering like a white cloud amid the grand dark shadows which had fallen on

and about the forms of her ancestors for many generations. As the heiress of Marchmont, she seemed to feel intuitively that she was descending it for the last time; and to her excited imagination, a sort of shiver agitated the arras and tapestries which were let into the panels of the walls, and the pictures of the dead and gone Marchmonts seemed to look down upon her from their frames with a mocking smile.

In the hall she encountered the old butler, who looked scared and vacant, as though he were threatened by a fit.

"Are we to have no dinner to-day?" she asked coldly, and with a well-assumed air of haughty indifference to the fact, which was causing to all her adherents in the establishment an agony of suspense. "How long is the usual routine of things to be suspended?

"The Squire had not come down, Miss Bessie, or you either; and the bell was not to be rung, by the doctor's orders."

"Let the dinner be served immediately," was the only comment upon this answer.

And as Bessie passed by him on her way to the drawing-room, Mr. Serschal hazarded the remark,

"Will Mr. Duberry dine with you, Miss?"

"I am only responsible for myself," she replied, as with a proud calm step she went on her way, with no trace in her outward bearing of the tumult which had so lately raged in her breast.. There is only one Eye that can penetrate human nature in its depths; on how many scenes of solitary abandonment to the impulses of overmastering passion does not that compassionate eye look down? We know by personal experience that no human sorrow can bear the eye of man, woman, or child to rest upon its outward expression in its *abandon*, when the obedient senses obey the impulses of the soul, and lift up an impotent remonstrance in the face of heaven itself. It is directly we are *alone* that we allow ourselves the expression of our grief; when least alone in one sense, that we cast ourselves on our bended knees, and falter out to heaven what we mantle with jealous

precaution from the cold ken and contact of men—our fellow-creatures—on this lonely earth.

Dinner was presently served, and Miss Marchmont dined alone. Had Bertie been aware she was downstairs, he might possibly have joined her; but his heart was filled with a newly-born anxiety. His mother was seriously ill.

He had not been allowed to see her, and the doctor, when he had detained him for a moment to inquire after her, had gravely shaken his head, and passed back to his patient's room without a word. Those were agonizing moments for Bertie—all his natural interests thus reversed and at war one with another. He longed to be with Bessie, and to ascertain how she bore the announcement which could no longer be kept from her. His heart was torn with anxiety, not only on his mother's account, but on the issue of her hour of trial and danger. Should the child prove a girl, all might yet be well; but if otherwise, he could not even guess at the result, with regard to the man-

ner in which the present heiress would behave under so (to her) unexpected a blow.

If the Squire had been aged before, he might now have been called broken and crushed to the ground. He wandered about in the restless manner which had of late so sorely tried the temper of his wife, and hailed Bertie's arrival with a genuine transport of joy.

"Nothing could have been more fortunate—more opportune than this visit of yours," he said, warmly grasping his hand in welcome. "To tell you the truth, this anxiety has been wearing me out; and I dreaded breaking down before her—before poor Bessie—she will naturally feel it so much—you have seen her, of course?"

"I met Miss Marchmont coming from the station; but when I parted from her she was, I am sure, quite unprepared for the position which events might assume."

"Ah, dear me!—dear me! she ought to have been told. I dread the sudden effect on her nerves. Poor dear—poor dear, she

ought to have been told. I fear it will go hard with her if——"

Here the doctor entered the room, and relieved the Squire of the responsibility of finishing his sentence; an opportunity which was grateful to him, for he could not induce his tongue to frame the words which were freely bandied in the servants' hall, "if it should prove a son and heir."

The result of the Squire's interview with Mr. Mavors was, that a man and horse (Lancelot again) were immediately despatched to the neighbouring town for further advice. The white face of Mrs. Rigors was seen for a moment in the housekeeper's room, bearing a widely different expression from any that had before characterised it while under that roof, as she gave some hasty directions for the immediate preparation of remedies required by the doctor for instant use.

It was just at this juncture that Bessie had descended the oak staircase, and given her orders that dinner should be served at once. She ignored, or chose to ignore, that

the dark wings of danger and death were hovering over the quiet house. As she trifled with the food on her plate, and pretended to eat, Miss Marchmont felt conscious that the eyes of the men-servants who waited upon her in her state were bent on her with pity and curiosity.

"You need not wait," she said, as they officiously anticipated her every want—"I will ring when I leave the room."

The two tall footmen immediately disappeared on receiving this order; but the ancient and privileged servant, the old butler, lingered, and finally shut himself, not outside, but inside the door.

"Don't you fret, Miss Bessie," he said, the tears coursing one another down his own cheeks. "You'll be making yourself ill again else, and there'd be a kettle of fish! All the servants is on your side, and they'll stand to you firm, even if there should be a son and *hare*."

Were the hateful words never to be out of Bessie's unwilling ears, or the meaning

of them out of her heart, newly awakened to their significance? She pushed away her plate from her with a passionate gesture.

"There is a little too much of this ill-timed sympathy evinced now, when it is too late; a little less deception previously would have spared me much. Let the candles be lighted in the drawing-room at once, if you please."

The old butler placed his hand on the door-handle, shifted from one leg to the other, fidgeted with a table-napkin, which he held in his hand, and at last relinquishing his half-formed purpose of leaving the room without a further revelation, he approached his young mistress more closely, and whispered asthmatically in her ear—

"She is very ill—don't you fret and worrit yourself. God only knows how this affair will turn out, after all, Miss Bessie!"

A shudder passed over the young girl's frame. She had not realised any actual danger to the life of her step-mother, and to hint of it coolly as a probable contingency

that she would die, caused her to tremble and turn pale.

"Do not talk of it," she replied hastily; "put lights in the drawing-room, and let papa know that I am come down."

"Mr. Erbert is with him in the library—shall I let them both know?"

"No; if papa is not alone I do not mind. In fact, I had rather be by myself; you need not say anything about it."

But as she crossed the hall to go to the drawing-room, she encountered Bertie face to face.

"The Squire wished me to see you, Bessie," he said quietly. "My mother is in great danger, and he wished you to be made aware of the circumstances; but," he added, dropping his voice, and speaking, as it were, to himself, "it is rather a hard task to impose upon me."

"I am aware of the circumstances, and can feel for your anxiety," Bessie replied, with a great effort at self-control. "I hope that it will soon be relieved."

"Bessie, you are an angel," the young

man said, impulsively seizing her hand, and pressing it tenderly and respectfully to his lips.

But she quickly withdrew it from his keeping, with a gesture that had in it a shade of haughtiness foreign to her usual character.

"Not now," she said; "you do not understand me, Bertie. I am by no means an angel, and do not wish to be considered one. You can go back to papa, and relieve his mind on my account. Tell him I am perfectly aware of the circumstances attending Mrs. Marchmont's illness. He need not be afraid to meet me. I will try and forget, both for my own sake and his—the happy old days when I was his only child. Pray return to him—I am happier to-night alone."

The tones of her voice were so different to any that Bertie had ever heard proceed from her lips before, that he looked earnestly in her face, to see if he could find any clue there to the feelings which dictated them. But she might indeed have forgotten

"herself to stone," for any sign or demonstration of past or present feeling visible in her impassible brow.

"Good night, then, Bessie, if you will have it so; but are you sure it is well for you to be alone?"

"Good night," was the young girl's calm reply; "I suppose some one will make it worth while to acquaint me when the event is over. I hope to be able to congratulate you in the morning. In the meantime, I wish you as good a night as you can expect to pass under the circumstances," and she held out her hand to him, which was steady and firm as a rock, although his own trembled like an aspen leaf. He dared not again raise it to his lips; there was a barrier of ice between him and the young girl who had so lately approved the sentiment of the motto which she was now so bitterly reversing.

I do not dare to intrude on her solitary vigil, or to lay bare the wounds over which, with the reticence of a heart at the same time proud and sensitive, she would have thrown an inpenetrable veil.

Far into the night she watched; and then, overcome with weariness, and with waiting for the news which never came, she threw herself, still dressed, upon the bed, and sank into a heavy slumber just as the breath of a spring morning warmed into life all animate creation, filling the throats of the thrush and blackbird with their full-toned music, and waking the choirs of the morning into song.

She remained awake until past four, when nature triumphed over the prolonged anxiety, and at five she was in a deep sleep. Twice Lucy, her faithful little maid, stole quietly to the bed and gazed upon the pale face, and watched the regular breathing which alone gave animation to the statue-like form. Twice she retired without waking her, although she was the bearer of *the news* with which she had been charged to acquaint her young mistress without fail. She took up her station in the next room, from which she could hear the slightest movement; and as the church clock struck eight, she fancied she heard a sound, and entered the sleeping-room.

"Did you call me, ma'am?" she asked softly. And a voice from the bed replied,

"No, Lucy, I did not call you; but what have you to tell me, now that you are come?" She sat up, looking scared, as one does who has had an evil dream, and pushing back her hair from her face, said, "Speak, Lucy, why do you torture one with this suspense?"

"Mrs. Marchmont died this morning at five o'clock."

The words seemed to fall without meaning on the young girl's ear.

"Died," she repeated mechanically, "this morning at five o'clock!"

"Yes, ma'am, the poor lady died. She was quite insensible towards the last. The last words she said were, 'Save the child!' The baby's alive still; and, oh! miss, I don't know how to tell you, but the worst is come to the worst, and it is—a son and heir!"

CHAPTER XIV.

"But see! the well-plumed hearse comes nodding on,
Stately and slow." BLAIR.

"It is but waste to bury them preciously."
CHAUCER.

A TINY object, swathed in flannel, and squaring an impotent fist at the world in general, had been so little attended to, while life still remained in her who gave him birth, that he had nearly made a quiet exit, almost as soon as he had made his appearance on life's stage.

But when all was over, and death had set his seal upon the features of the unfortunate woman, whose most dismal forbodings with regard to his advent had been thus terribly realized, a feeble wail from the

dark corner of the chamber, recalled to the nurse the fact that there was a spark of life still lingering in a very fragile and tender being, which, if not very quickly seen to, and fanned into a flame, would go out altogether, and be as though it had never been, within the frame of the son and the heir of the house, that had been son and heirless so long.

The advent of that unwelcome and unloved little being into the world of strangers, none of them, now his mother was gone, likely to look upon him in any other light than that of an unwished-for intruder, was uncelebrated by the usual rejoicings attending the birth of an heir.

People asked after "the baby," under their breath, as though he had been smuggled into the world surreptitiously, and did not represent, in his own tiny person, the future hope of the family. Yet nothing could deprive him (should he live) of the inheritance, or the name. The contingency of his birth had been provided for, more than a century before he had been born,

and the entail upon the heirs male was a fact too strong to be waived by any simple member of the family, or to be set aside by less than three generations united in one cause, by their common consent.

Thus, in some instances, the property is the *personal* element; the master, in whose livery the possessors for the time being are bound to appear, but over whose disposition the *individual* has no more control than the life-tenant has over the ultimate disposal of his lands or tenures.

The baby upstairs, on whose puckered brow no fond kiss had been imprinted by loving lips, whom no merry peal had ushered upon the stage of life, in whose honour no oxen had been roasted whole—over whom the doctor and the nurse held a daily synod, designating the son and heir generally by the impersonal pronoun "*it*"—that baby was fenced in and protected by the whole force of English law, which, casting aside all mere personal considerations, proclaimed him, in the face of the world, as the representative of the family, the indisputable

successor to those wide acres of landed property, which his step-sister had so long been taught to consider would one day inevitably be her own. Yes, the fact was an undisputed one; and the proud young heiress of Marchmont was denuded of her crown and sceptre, and was nothing more nor less, as regarded her own individual standing in the family and household, than step-sister to the son and heir.

It was a bitter fact, and one which it almost broke her heart to realize; but she bore it silently, and let the fox gnaw at her heart-strings, under the mantle of profound reserve, in which she now arrayed herself, without any outward sign.

Bertie was almost crushed beneath the load of his own grief.

His love for his mother, whom he had lost under such sad circumstances, returned to his heart in a flood, as he gazed upon her dead face, and kissed again and again the purely-chiselled features, now set in the majesty of death. All her faults, all her short-comings were forgiven and forgotten

in that one last lingering look. Who can reckon up such, when gazing on the face of the once loved and newly dead? Not one fashioned in the mould in which Bertie's nature was fashioned. "Wax to receive, and marble to retain," was his honest, faithful heart. He and his mother had been alienated during life, but none the less tenderly does he place that long dark lock of her beautiful hair—the hair of which she had been so proud—upon his heart, to lie there until his own dying day. A pang of remorse shot through his soul too, as he thought of that hour he had spent in exchanging love-talk with Bessie in the chestnut walk, when she was struggling in those agonies which would prove her death.

There were many contending feelings struggling for mastery in the breast of the young man; but the strongest, the most pitiful, was tender regret for the mother who lay in her white shroud so quietly, with her dead face upturned towards his own.

And the poor Squire, the bereaved husband, who had been, in his way, fond of, if

a little afraid of, his wife, what is there to tell of him? Only that he shut himself up until after the funeral, at which he appeared totally overcome, and so bent and aged, that more tears fell for him, and for the great alteration that had come over him during the last six months, than for the comparatively friendless woman whose body was laid in the Marchmont vault, with the pomp and ceremony which had always been kept up by the members of that family, from time immemorial, in the burying of their dead.

They placed the coffin side by side with that of Bessie's mother, a circumstance which the latter would have considered almost profanation of that lost mother's remains; and as Mr. Kingdom read the solemn words, "Dust to dust, ashes to ashes," Bertie stepped forward and scattered earth on the coffin lid. He was the most sincere and heart-felt mourner in that mournful black-robed throng.

The Squire's grief, more demonstrative and more childish, was as water is to wine,

in comparison with his; and the worthy gentleman was even able to take that sort of dismal satisfaction in the "respect paid to the family," evinced by the tenantry, in the deepest of crape hat-bands, and the blackest and most ill-fitting of kid-gloves, at the funeral obsequies of the lady who, on her own account, was but very little lamented, either by the Marchmont dependents, or members of the household.

If Bertie, however, was the deepest, there was another who was as sincere a mourner, and that was Mrs. Rigors, the late lady's-maid and confidante, now ousted from her position of influence and importance, snubbed by the nurse, when she endeavoured to take forcible possession of the body of the infant, reprimanded by the doctor, forgotten by those to whom she looked to maintain her authority and position in the establishment, and apparently about to sink into hopeless insignificance, just as her proudest hopes seemed to be on the eve of completion.

Mrs. Rigors shed as genuine tears as she

ever shed in her life on the day of her late mistress's funeral. "She frightened herself to death!" she said more than once to herself, thus hurling at the inanimate and unconscious head one of those reproaches which in the days of poverty and distrust she had not been slow to heap upon it living—for Mrs Duberry had put up with more from her tire-woman in the way of impertinence, and even insult, than Mrs. Marchmont had ever cared to acknowledge, even to herself. "She is a first-rate maid," she would argue to herself; and, with the passion of personal vanity in her breast, that was a fact to cover a multitude of sins.

It was a very mournful and incongruous family party which assembled at dinner on the evening after the dismal ceremony had been performed. Incongruous because the interests, and the hopes, and the sorrows, and the disappointments of each admitted of no sympathy in the breast of another. The son truly mourned for a mother, whose position in that family he had done his best to frustrate and to prevent; but at the

same time he cherished a strong repugnance to the child that had been born to her, and who would prove, as he fully believed, the means of the total alienation of that dawning feeling in Bessie's breast which he had begun to hope would one day ripen into love. She had been deposed and ousted by one who was the same relation to both of them —a sort of unnatural and most unwelcome link, to bind them nearer in the ties of connectionship, but to disunite them for ever from the real unison of soul with soul.

"Have you seen your little brother, sir?" had been the question asked of him by the fawning and obsequious nurse, who was indignant that "her baby" should have been ushered into the world under a ban, as it were, and he to be the heir and king of all by-and-by, as she told him twenty times a day; and the question caused the young man so addressed to start and turn pale.

"Take it away," he said, involuntarily shrinking from contact with the soft, puffy, powdered, pink face which the nurse held towards him, evidently expecting that he

would bestow a caress upon it. "For God's sake, woman, take it away!"

"Well, if that isn't the most unnaturalest, the most cruelest of things as ever I heard tell on!" grumbled the woman, as she carried off the child; "and his poor mother not in her grave a week. There'll be a judgment in this house before long—it's not in natur to treat a poor hinnocent hinfant so; and there'll be a judgment—mark my words."

CHAPTER XVII.

"The last links are broken
Which bound me to thee,
And the words thou hast spoken
Have rendered me free.

"If my love were deemed boldness,
That error is o'er—
I have witnessed thy coldness,
And prize thee no more."

Song.

IF Bertie's heart, however, was sore with contending feelings, what was the state of Bessie Marchmont's, which was wrung in every fibre, and which was not like his—open to the mollifying effects of genuine grief. She had hated her step-mother while living, and now that she was dead she had cause (so she argued with herself) to hate her even more.

The child, the heir, was still alive—he whom a wayward fate had sent into the world to deprive her of her inheritance at the cost of his mother's life. Then a marked change had come over the poor old Squire since his wife's death. His eyes had a vacant expression, and over one of them the lid drooped in a peculiar manner, which his daughter had never observed before. His voice was husky and his speech incoherent at times; and his mouth appeared to be drawn a little awry. He had had some sort of a fit, his man-servant thought, the morning of the funeral, and had never been himself since; and Bessie's worst fears were at once excited on his account. All her love, all her devotion for the broken, shattered man, seemed to come back in a flood to her heart; and he for his part clung with a childish dependance, which was pitiable to see in one of his once masterful nature, to the daughter from whom he had been alienated so long.

Bertie, the day after the funeral, determined to return to town. He felt his pre-

sence there an intrusion, and bitterly felt Bessie's altered manner towards him. In the waywardness of her nature, she had from a child been very apt to revenge an injury, fancied or real, from the hand of one beloved on a totally innocent head; and she made Bertie in this instance the scape-goat for the injury which fate had inflicted on her in the birth of a son and heir.

She had first put on her mourning on the day on which Mrs. Marchmont was buried, and Bertie had felt himself warmly drawn towards her by this circumstance, which, although an entirely conventional observance of proper respect for her own father on her part, appeared to him to be a link between them, and a sign of forgiveness of past injuries.

She looked so sad, but so beautiful, in those heavy, lustreless draperies, which are so trying to most complexions, that he could almost have found it in his heart to envy the departed spirit, mourned by such an angel. He approached her, and would

have taken her hand, but she drew it from him with a gesture as of one who suffers bodily pain.

"I was going to thank you," he said gravely, and fixing his grave eyes on her face, "for this."

"You have nothing to thank me for," she answered, coldly; "the forms of society must be observed, for papa's sake—nothing more."

"It is not like you to carry your resentment to the grave. Oh! Bessie, have you not one kind word?"

"I am sorry for you, Bertie—very sorry; you cannot expect me to say more. I have never had a mother, but that fact has not woke kindlier feelings towards me; and now," she said passionately, and with a movement of her hands, as if she would put his presence away from her as a hateful thing, "there is an eternal barrier between us. The sooner we part the better. Will you not go?"

"Certainly; I have waited too long al-

ready—when I waited for this," answered the young man proudly. "No one shall ever say those words to me twice. May you never regret them, or realise the bitterness which I do at this moment. If I have loved you too well—too presumptuously—forgive me. You have been merciful so far—you have put it out of your own power to wound me again. Good-bye, Bessie; I will never intrude my presence upon you more."

"Good-bye, Bertie," she replied, in a voice which faltered a little, and with a slight movement, as though she would have extended her hand; but he had turned quickly on his heel, and had left the room before she had realised that he was actually *gone.* She had been accustomed to tyranize over him so long, that she was surprised to find he had taken her at her word in this instance. An angry choking sob rose to her lips.

"It is better so," she said at length, clenching her little hand, and compressing her lips. "I must have hated him if he

had stayed; and if he loves *me*, it is better for him that he should go and forget me. I can think of no one now but papa."

CHAPTER XVIII.

"Witches can blight our corn by magic spell,
And with enchantments dry the springing well,
Make grapes and acorns fall at their command,
And strip our orchards bare without a hand."

A HANDSOME gipsy girl was standing shading her eyes and looking down the lane which led to the encampment on Stone Cross Moor. An old, bent, and withered crone warmed her hands over the sticks on which the three-legged pot was set to boil.

"Do you see aught?" she asked of the maiden.

"No, mother, not yet; but there's no fear that Joey will fail this time, unless there should be any fresh trouble at the Hall."

"Trouble enough, girl—trouble enough there'll be there, I reckon; but what for should that keep our Joey? He's not cut out of anything by the son and heir, even if he should be, as the master thinks, a gentleman born."

"No; but he's heart and soul wrapped up in the young lady—her as saved him as he always says, although it was his own 'cuteness that saved him, for the matter of that."

"He's a 'cute lad and a good one too. He's never forgot us, Miriam, in it all," answered the old woman, knocking the ashes out of her pipe. "If we could only teach him to prig, he'd be the making of us now."

"Don't you go and try that on now, mother, and get he into trouble again. He brings you all he earns reg'lar, and nothing will ever make he thieve—so don't you go for to ask him."

"Drat the girl! I'm not going to ask 'un," growled Hester Lovel, for the reader will doubtless have concluded that it was she.

What must thee go a meddling in other folks' business for? Hold'st tongue."

"Here he is!" the girl soon after exclaimed, as the figure of the lad, now a boy of twelve years old, appeared in the lane—that's our Joe, sure enough."

"How's mother to-day?" was his first question, as the handsome young gipsy-woman greeted him with a smile, that showed the whole row of her dazzling white teeth to perfection; "has she been expecting me long?"

"Long is it, you young thief and vagabone!" here put in the crone herself, in a burst of the terrible banter in which she sometimes indulged, in exceptional cases of fondness. "Why, there's Miriam been straining her eyes for the last half hour, and not after a lazy lout of a sweetheart, more's the wonder. She was a-looking for our Joe."

"Well, here he is, mother; but a rare piece of work I've had to get here, I can tell you. The housekeeper's as sharp as a needle, and I can't always get on her blind side. But I'm not come empty-handed. It

was pay-day on Saturday, and here it is, every farthing," added the lad, turning the contents of his pockets into the withered and feeble, but still grasping palm. "Ay, count it, mother, you'll find it all right."

"And what's doing up at the Hall, Joe? How's the young leddy, and the old gentleman, and the bonny son and heir?"

"—— the son and heir!" was the boy's only reply; and his kindling cheek and flashing eye showed that the oath with which long habit had once made him familiar, had been called to his lips by some powerful emotion which he did not attempt to control. "I wish you would not talk about him, mother. I wish from my heart that he was dead, I do. If wishes would kill him, he would soon die—little beast!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" feebly chuckled the crone. "I've roused you a bit, have I! What 'ud you give me for a bit of a charm to bring your wishes about, and no hanging matter either?"

"I'd give you all I have, and p'raps I'd give you this," the boy replied, his eyes

sparkling with what was to him quite a new greed, and extending another sixpence towards the crone, who only shrugged her shoulders and laughed her terrible laugh.

"I must have gold, or what'll bring gold. You know what I'd do it for, Joe."

"I'm not a-going to thieve, once for all, if that's what you mean, mother," the boy replied sadly, but with a dogged resolution in his eye which augured ill for the hag's chance of inducing him to pilfer, even to earn the charm which he so much coveted. After a moment's reflection and evident struggle with himself, he asked, "What should I have to do, if I had it, to make my wishes come about?"

"You'd only have to wear it round your neck, under your nice warm little weskit, as the kind young leddy give you, and just look hard at anything you don't perticklerfancy, when you pass his way. If it's a dog, or a cat, or a cow, or a horse, or a babby—it don't matter what, if the charm has time to work. It's a powerful thing that."

"I should like to have it."

"Ha! ha! ha! so would a good many, Joe—so would a many—but it's a thing not to be had for the asking; you know the price on it well."

"I ain't a-going to rob the Cunnel, if that's what you mean, or to help your master to rob him."

"And who axed you to rob the Cunnel, pray? And who put them bad thoughts into your wicked little heart, Joe? It must have been the devil his own self. Fie, fie!"

And here the hag laughed again the terrible laugh—for Hester Lovel had grown very old all of a sudden, as gipseys do—and from the hale woman two years before, had become a witch-like-looking creature, bent almost double, and holding her black pipe in a skinny hand like a claw.

"Never mind mother, Joe," said the young woman kindly, and stroking his curly head with her hand; "pretty hair," she added, pulling a curl through her fingers "isn't it, mother?"

"Oh! pretty enough—but that's not what we was talking, were it, Joe?—we were a-talking about that there charm."

"I've got something for you, Miriam—something that your sweetheart will like to see you in; come down the lane with me a step or two and I'll show it you."

"Poor lad! don't ye spend your money on me," the girl replied, while her fine lustrous eyes moistened for a moment; "you'd give away your head, Joe, if one asked you, I do believe."

"*She* ain't satisfied, though," was the laconic reply of the boy, as he pointed backwards, with his thumb over his left shoulder, to where the old crone still sat grumbling and crooning over the fire; and as he drew from his pocket a little brown paper parcel, the contents of which made Miriam's eyes flash, in spite of her protest, he added, "Be a kind girl, Miriam, and get me the secret of that there charm, if you can. Won't that show up fine on your dark hair, nights when the camp fires is lit?"

As he spoke, he displayed a bright yellow

silk scarf, striped with blue and red, which he had long been saving money to purchase for his favourite, Miriam, who had been a nursing mother of fourteen to him, when he was a tiny child in the gipsy camp.

"Don't you listen to what mammy there says about charms and rubbish. She don't mean any harm, but she'll get you into trouble, Joe, some day, if you do."

"Well, I won't never forsake old friends, because I can't see the duty of that; and it ain't nowhere's mentioned in the Cattychrism, as I has to learn Sundays now; but I ain't a-going to thieve, because there's a rule against that, as is plain enough to all. 'Thou shalt not steal.' Besides, it's not in my natur', never was."

"You stick to that, Joe, that's a good boy, and you won't come to no harm. I'll wear the ribbon to-night, and for your sake."

The gipsy girl stooped (she was of an unusual and commanding height) to kiss the lad as she spoke; and then enforcing upon him the expediency of caution, she bade him go home before he was missed.

"There'd be a fine kettle of fish if they ever found out where you came."

"All right—I'm wide-awake," the lad answered; and the next moment, he was lost to sight in the deep underwood of the Ash Copse, which skirted the Higher Downs, in which Bessie had once been so terrified, and which she had never entered since.

Once out of the copse, Joey made the best of his way home. He had many little offices to perform in his position as gardener, in the garden wilderness of his young mistress, which she had not visited since the day when she had spent so many hours there, hugging to herself the conviction that "Bertie would be home at four." It was a whole month since. There was a a short cut to it through the stable-yard, and down a path which ran parallel with what was called the shrubbery walk, which was so screened and sheltered by a thick undergrowth of laurels, that any one of Joey's size would be completely hidden from sight, although in some parts not di-

vided by many feet from the broad coach road, which always afforded a dry and sheltered walk, and which had been taken advantage of by the nurse and Mrs. Rigors, when they daily and duly aired the son and heir.

"He grows fast," Joey overheard a female voice observe, and immediately became aware who the trio consisted of, although he could see nothing but the occasional flash of a long white robe through an unusually thin part of the shrubbery.

"Too fast for some people, Susan," replied the ex-lady's-maid, who had exerted all the influence she possessed with the Squire to be retained as *gouvernante* to the poor babe, who was so happily unconscious of the turmoil and heart-burnings his appearance upon the stage so inopportunely had cost. "He'll live to be a man, I hope, and take down the pride of some people, who shall be nameless, a peg."

"Blessings on his little heart!" answered the simple woman, who was not a native of the place, and whose whole interests were

concentrated in the child to whom she took the part of mother, and who, obeying the instinct of her nature, knew, as the great master has it, "how sweet it is to love the babe that milks one." "There are none so cruel as not to wish him to grow, sure."

"There are those not a hundred miles away, Susan, who'd be glad enough if he were in the coffin by the side of his poor mamma. It's not likely that Miss Marchmont would care to see him grow into a man, and she been called the heiress so long."

"But she's not likely to hurt—there's plenty for her and for little master too," answered the woman, pressing the babe to her heart, after smiling into his unconscious face in a manner intended to re-assure the child, who blinked at her with his wondering and wonderful eyes, for all reply.

"You are a simple one, Susan, you are. Why, don't you know that the little master here's the son and heir? Don't you know what that means? Why, that he'll be master here some day, and that Miss Marchmont, who holds her head so high, and looks

as if we were all dirt under her feet, won't be no better than a beggar and an outcast. I see you don't know the meaning of a son and heir."

"Bless him, then!—bless him!—bless him! He's a beauty, that's what he is!" answered the nurse.

There was a listener not many yards off, who would have entirely reversed that blessing, if wishes could have done it, and who would have consigned the son and heir to the same fate, in reality, which Mrs. Rigors had so vindictively applied to the former heiress—that of a beggar and an outcast from his father's gates. The idea took complete possession of the boy's imagination, and he hated the child with the unreasoning hate which is one of the strongest forces for evil in the history of mankind. The feeling was encouraged by the servants and dependants, who all adored their young mistress, and who made the undue exaltation of Mrs. Rigors, to be lady-superintendant of the young heir's infant person, a theme for continual comment, sneers, and ridicule.

Miss Marchmont had not herself expressed any wish or opinion in the matter at all. The very existence of the child appeared to be ignored by her. She never saw him, or inquired for him. Too high-souled to be a hypocrite, and resentful of the great wrong he had wrought her, ever to regard him in any other light than that of an usurper, she took the line of letting him be to her, personally, as though he had never been. There was a tacit understanding to that effect between those who visited at the Hall and herself. No one ever asked either her or the Squire after the health of the infant, who lived in a little world of his own—his importance only recognised by his immediate attendants; but even in that limited sphere he began to number satellites and sycophants ready to pay their homage to the rising sun.

CHAPTER XIX.

"Years following years steal something every day,
At last they steal us from ourselves away."

POPE.

I MUST now beg the reader to carry himself on, in imagination, for three years. Bessie once more the sole mistress, if not the heiress of Marchmont, has saddened and deepened into a stronger, but less loveable character than that in which we have formerly known her. Her beauty too appeared to have undergone a change scarcely less striking, and the hair folded back from the fine egg-shaped oval of her face gave a more chiselled look to the features, which were paler and more transparent than of old.

"She is much more like her mother," those

are apt to observe who knew Miss Claverin in the full tide and zenith of her beauty an youth; and Colonel le Garde acknowledge to himself that there is truth in the remark.

But if Bessie were altered, what words can express the sad change that has come over the Squire—the handsome, upright noble-looking man of only four years back. He is sitting in his arm-chair in the library, looking about him with a painful, restless, and yet almost vacant expression in his eyes; and that terrible distortion in the mouth—that had been his handsomest feature—which betrays the hand of paralysis, and leaves unmistakable traces of that fell disease.

Squire Marchmont was indeed a child again, but a child nursed by the tender, devoted untiring love of his only daughter, who now lived, as she told herself, only for him. For his part, she seemed to be the only one thing upon earth, the true image of which had not been scared and blotted out of his darkened and shattered mind.

If by chance anyone happened to mention to him his other child, his son, he seemed neither to hear or comprehend what such a one would say; and upon these occasions he would take refuge in what appeared to be utter vacuity and imbecility to the lookers-on, but which was perhaps the veil of voluntary reticence, by which the victim of this most cruel of mental blights endeavours still to keep sacred the spark which illumines the shrine of what we call our "inner selves." The hand of a drowning woman clutches convulsively at the kerchief which has kept her bosom during life "sacred to her babes," and the struggle of the drowning intellect may, for all we know to the contrary, be to keep the veil drawn which has thrown a decent mystery over the holiest part of a man, either in life or death.

What passes through a clouded brain, however, how much, or how little, to what degree it is sentient, or capable of voluntary action, we know not, on this side the grave; but it is curious to note how seldom the words "I think," when applied not merely

from force of habit, but to express the originating of a new idea, ever pass the lips of a patient upon which paralysis, in however slight a form, has set its deadly seal; there is a certain blunting and deadening of the soul, and a corresponding increased susceptibility to nervous irritation in the body.

It was to such a wreck, in its most painful form, that Bessie's life was now wholly devoted. Mr. Marchmont had had two strokes, and what remained of him scarcely bore any resemblance to his former self.

There was another member of that family circle on whom time also had worked great changes since he last came under our notice, as a month old baby in the arms of his nurse. Little Geoffrey Marchmont, the son and heir, had become a fine, beautiful child, tall and strong for his age, and of so bright and happy a disposition, that those who had been most bitterly prejudiced against him, could hardly help regarding him with more lenient eyes.

Mrs. Rigors was firmly installed in the nursery. Miss Marchmont never interfered

with her, and was indeed thankful that she should take the management and responsibility of the child, in whom she had never felt, and never affected to feel, the slightest interest, entirely off her hands.

The rest of the household she managed in a quiet, authoritative way, for which, knowing her as we have done, a loving, impulsive child almost in years, and quite a child in feeling—can hardly at first understand. The old servants and dependants loved her dearly still, but not even the privileged Mr. Serschal would have ventured upon any openly-expressed sympathy, or profession of allegiance to her cause. She had accepted her new position with a strong reserve, that none (not even the Colonel) could penetrate; and he believed, and trembled in believing, that her mind was preying on itself during all those long hours which she spent, either actually alone, or with one whose companionship could now only add a fresh weight to her daily burden of care and responsibility.

Bertie *had kept his word.* His proud

spirit had been stung to the very quick, and he had never crossed the threshold at Marchmont since that sad young figure, dressed in its heavy black draperies, had held up its shadowy hands to him in the twilight, and asked him passionately, "Will you not go?"

A new and brilliant career had just opened out for his acceptance; he was becoming famous. Briefs flowed in from far and wide, and fortune poured her treasures into his lap; but his strong clear head was not likely to be turned in the moment of success. He no longer went much into society. He had drained that cup to the dregs, and he loved better the companionship of his own thoughts and his pen. He contributed brilliant articles to the leading reviews and periodicals, ridiculing those follies in which he had lately participated; and his satires told home, because they were recognised as the work of one who had lived and breathed in the atmosphere he described, and not of one who flings stones at glass houses which he has never himself occupied.

His social articles were read with avidity; thousands revelled in the cynicism, the mouthpiece of the ill-nature, which thus went stamped out of the mint, which it had entered rough and unhewn; solid ore and pure metal, but unable to pass current as coin of the realm until it had received the genuine stamp of wit.

"Why could not I have written such-and-such an article?" many amongst the young barrister's personal friends asked themselves, as they recognised some stinging criticism from his pen. "It seems so easy when another fellow's thought of it before."

Fortunately Bertie preserved his prerogative for thinking of such matters first, and his name became well known in the world as a writer, as he became personally less and less familiar with the fashionable clique in which he had once moved. Mothers had at last unwillingly given up the idea of securing him as a possible *parti*, and the verdict of "not a marrying man" had gone forth respecting him in the circles of Belgravia. He lived indeed a very solitary

life, and, excepting when the duties of his profession brought him into contact with men of his own profession, he, like Bessie Marchmont, was too much in that situation of which it has been said that it "is not good for man to be."

Over Colonel le Garde's iron-grey head Time had passed, perhaps, with the lightest hand among any of the characters that have hitherto appeared in these scenes. The battle of life had been fought so long ago, that the changes and chances of late years brought no visible effects on him in their train. He could hardly be a sadder or a graver man than he was when we first knew him, and his bodily infirmities had not increased. The Squire, who a few years ago had spoken of the Colonel as an elderly man in comparison with himself—an allusion which always brought a grim sort of smile to the lip of the former, and a twinkle to his keen eyes—now looked at least ten years his senior.

Joey had sprung into a tall strip of a lad of fifteen. Still as devoted as ever to his

young mistress, he was an anomaly as to character in the eyes of the good Colonel; he had taken great pains with him, and had endeavoured with all his might to instil into his mind the principles of moral rectitude, which seemed, in some things, to be sown there in an alien soil. He was a bright, active, and intelligent lad, however; and Bessie, who saw only his best side, and was partially blinded by his extraordinary devotion to her, could see nothing to be uneasy about with regard to his moral rectitude; and the habit he had of playing truant, sometimes for whole days, and which was his principal failing in the old soldier's eyes, was looked upon by her in the light of a juvenile delinquency, for which she could make every allowance.

CHAPTER XX.

"An old man is twice a child."
SHAKSPEARE.

"Old age, a second child, by nature curst,
With more and greater evils than the first;
Weak, sickly, full of pains—in every breath
Railing at life, and yet afraid of death."
CHURCHILL.

"From the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records."
Hamlet.

"HOW is your father to-day?"

This question was addressed by the Colonel to Bessie on one of those fine September mornings, which came to her laden with the bitter sweet memories of the past. Uncle Rex was now a daily visitor at the Hall. The brougham was sent for him

regularly at twelve o'clock in the afternoon, and took him home at nine at night.

"He is not quite so well as usual, I fear. He has been very nervous and irritable all the morning, and he says that he wishes to see you; but I cannot always understand what he means. His utterance seems more indistinct than usual, Uncle Rex," she added, stopping him as he was limping off to the library, which room the Squire always occupied now. "I have been thinking of something that it pains me to mention—but it is a duty, and must be done. I cannot blind myself to the fact that papa's health is in a most precarious state. Indeed, Mr. Mavors has told me that any day he may have another attack, and——" here Bessie's voice failed her, and tears fell fast from her eyes, which it wrung the heart of the good Colonel to witness.

"Well, well, dear child, do not distress yourself. What can I do for you? What were you going to say to me?"

"I was going to say that guardians ought to be appointed to the child. Papa ought

to make a will; and I should like him to appoint you, Uncle Rex and Bertie Duberry. He has the best claim after you—and it would only be fair."

A deep shadow fell over Colonel le Garde's brow.

"I am an old man, Bessie," he said at last. "How long is it likely I shall survive your father?"

"Many years, perhaps. At all events it would be a comfort to *me* if you were appointed. I have a great respect for Bertie, but we could never act in concert. We have done with each other long ago."

"Have you said anything to the Squire on the subject?"

"I did last night; but you know how little notice he takes now. He said something about poor Uncle Richard, his brother, who was lost at sea long before I was born, and said he would be the proper man to act as guardian. He never mentions his son; and that is what I want you to speak to him about, Uncle Rex."

"I will go to him at once. Poor Geof-

frey!" was the reply, and the tones of his voice were so altered, and the expression of his face so peculiar, that he appeared to Bessie like one who talked in his sleep. She started at the unfamiliar appellation; for no one had ever called her father by his Christian name within her recollection. His late wife had always called him (as every one else did in the place or the neighbourhood) "the Squire."

"How strange every one is to-day," she thought to herself, as she prepared to go about her usual avocations; while the Colonel laid a faltering hand upon the lock of the library door, and hesitated a moment before he entered the presence of the invalid. The latter looked up as he entered, with more intelligence in his blunted features and wandering vacant eyes.

"How are you, Dick?" he asked, putting out his hand; "I've been waiting for you some time."

Colonel le Garde started back, and his face became of a dull leaden hue, as he heard a name which he had not heard for

more than a quarter of a century—the familiar name which had once been his own, but which had been blotted out of his life, with all that had made life dear.

"Geoffrey," he said, when he could speak, "what do you mean? How long have you known this? How long have you recognised me? Speak!"

But the sudden light, if such there had been, in the old Squire's memory, had kindled into a flare before it went out and was for ever gone. He gazed earnestly on the dark passion-lined face before him, and muttered, incoherently, "How do, Colonel?—how do——"

"Brother—brother Geoffrey, the husband of Elizabeth, for whose happiness mine was sacrificed, do you not know me? Do you not remember Dick?—'Dick, the scholar,' as you used to call him in joke? Will you not call me by that familiar name, here in the old place, once again?"

"Poor Dick!—poor fellow!—he was lost at sea long ago; I shall never see him again!" was the only reply to the appeal, as

tears, senile, pitiful tears coursed one another down the old man's cheeks. "He and Elizabeth—Mrs. Marchmont—died on the same day, and there was a grand funeral. Where's Bessie? What do you think, Colonel, she wants me to make a will—guardians—what's the good of guardians?—tomfools!"

"It will be necessary to appoint guardians to your son as long as he remains a minor after—after your decease, Geoffrey. The poor little chap must not be left without protectors in such a case, must he? Bessie is only anxious on his account. He will inherit Marchmont, as of course you know."

"I know nothing about it," answered the invalid, testily. "I'm worried and bothered too much; and that fool Mavors is no good —I'll have Wright to see me. Please ring the bell."

This was the poor Squire's invariable resource when he was driven into a corner for an intelligible answer to any necessary proposition; but the Colonel did not in this instance respond to it. His feelings had

sustained an entire revulsion; and he did not wish the traces of them, which he felt must be still apparent, to pass under the supervision of the man-servant who was now in constant attendance upon the invalid, both by day and night.

"Not yet," he said; "I have many things to talk to you about. I want to know why you called me 'Dick,' just now—the old name, which sounded so natural in the old place."

"I don't know, Colonel—I want Williams." And he began trying to hook the bell handle towards him with the end of his stick. "And Bessie?—where is Bessie? She's always out now with that young fellow. Ring the bell for me, will you, Colonel? —every one neglects me, as you see."

"No one will neglect you while I am here. Who's a better nurse and attendant than your own brother? So you believed that tale about poor Dick being lost at sea? Five years before you married Bessie Clavering, our Bessie's mother, was she not, brother Geoffrey?"

"I don't know what you are talking about. Marry a jade to break Bessie's heart! I won't do anything of the sort. She's not very dutiful to me, but she shan't marry young Kingdom—young rascal poached my preserves before he was ten years old. Have him up, Colonel!—Ring the bell!"

"Tell me first, brother Geoffrey—try and think—I want to know *why* Bessie Clavering did not marry you for five years after poor Dick, your brother, you know, was drowned at sea. Can't you think of that, and tell me what you remember about it?"

"Bessie Clavering married me—my wife—but she was never a good wife to me—her heart was drowned at sea—with poor Dick—I never knew it till she died—there was a grand funeral—ring the bell."

The poor old Squire was working himself up into an impotent rage, terrible to witness; and as he reiterated the order with an expression, which took a terrible significance from his distorted lips, through which his utterance came thick and incoherent,

Colonel le Garde, or rather Richard Marchmont, obeyed him, and the servant immediately attended to the summons.

A new difficulty presented itself to the mind of the younger brother, whose secret, if he still wished to preserve it, was safe in the keeping of one whose mind was evidently too much broken and shattered to preserve the reflection of a single entire image.

It was clear that the Squire was in no condition to make a will; and cruel as it would be to Bessie to inform her of the fact, he believed it to be one with which she ought forthwith to be made acquainted. He beckoned to the servant, who had been rearranging, for the twentieth time that morning, the pillows and appliances of the invalid chair which the loss of the use of his limbs on one side, since his last attack, had made necessary to the comfort of the invalid, and who was standing patiently listening to the murmurs, and watching the irritable movements of the poor Squire, as he undid all that he had just done for his comfort,

with the peevish perverseness of a spoilt child. The man only shook his head in return; and made a rapid sign to the effect that he dared not leave his master.

"The Squire's not so well to-day, as usual, Colonel. Perhaps Miss Marchmont will come and sit with him a bit; and then I can attend upon you, but he must not be left alone to-day."

"You're a fool, Williams—I want my sherry and water—let Mrs. Marchmont know," was all the listeners could glean from the thick voice from among the pillows.

Sick at heart, the Colonel turned his face from the scene, and went in search of Bessie, with many contending emotions at war in his heart.

"I have often told her I would tell her the history of a buried life," he argued with himself, "and it might have been useful to her once. But now the poor child's own heart appears to be dead and cast away. No fear of her abusing the influence that her beauty gives her over the fates of

men now. "Yet," he added thoughtfully, "it might be well she should know, that I am her near kinsman and natural guardian —that nothing could separate or alienate us in the world. Poor Geoffrey! poor brother! I can forgive you now, for the wrong you unconsciously did me; and *she* was not happy after all!"

He was standing at the window of a long corridor looking into the garden, and Bessie was on the terrace walk underneath, totally unconscious of his gaze. More than thirty years before, he had stood at that same window, looking down upon the terrace, where two figures occupied the same position which hers did at that moment. They were the figures of Geoffrey Marchmont and Bessie Clavering—noble and graceful figures both, as of high-bred dame and cavalier; and they were engaged in loving dalliance, the sight of which had made shipwreck of the younger brother's life.

Five and thirty years before Mr. and Mrs. Marchmont, the parents of the present representative of the house, were still living.

The only two sons, Geoffrey and Richard. The elder was the favourite of his parents; who, however, resented the injustice shown to his younger brother, to whom he was warmly attached. Geoffrey was remarkably handsome, and devoted to field and athletic sports of all kinds; Richard, though really not less manly, was shy and reserved, but as far superior to his brother in mental attainments, as he was inferior to him in personal attractions.

He returned the affection of his elder brother warmly, but was of a nature to feel keenly the partiality shown by his parents, more particularly by his mother, whose beauty Geoffrey inherited, and who was the idol and darling of her heart. When Geoffrey, the elder son, was seven and twenty, and Richard a year younger, an event took place which exercised a great influence over their future lives.

Mrs. Clavering, the widow of a distinguished officer, and a distant connection of Mrs. Marchmont, came, by her invitation, to take up her residence at the "Hermitage,"

a cottage standing in the Marchmont grounds, where she managed to live in elegant retirement, with her only daughter Bessie, a remarkably beautiful girl, with whom Geoffrey, the heir, became, as a matter of course with one of his susceptible nature, at once deeply enamoured. The affair was encouraged by the mothers on both sides; but it was Richard, the younger brother, whom Bessie Clavering herself encouraged, and by whom she was also passionately loved.

It was with difficulty they found opportunities of exchanging promises of mutual fidelity; for Geoffrey's suit was openly encouraged, both at the Hall and the Cottage, by the higher powers, and there was more than one evil influence at work to mar the present, and ruin the prospect of the future happiness of the real lovers. Mrs. Marchmont's own maid Lettice, a great favourite with her mistress, and a singularly handsome and striking-looking girl, had conceived a secret passion for Richard Marchmont, whose openly expressed admiration of her beauty she had construed into the profession of a

feeling of a warmer character; which, making her keen sighted, she soon detected the tacit understanding which existed between Richard Marchmont and Bessie Clavering, and determined to do her utmost to frustrate and ruin their hopes.

An opportunity occurred. In an evil hour the younger Marchmont, totally ignorant of the passion he had inspired in her breast, employed her to deliver a note to Miss Clavering, who, during the absence of her mother, was staying as a guest at the Hall. Lettice undertook, but betrayed the trust. She opened the letter, and made herself mistress of the contents. It was full of the romance natural to a poetic imagination at six and twenty, and contained the singular proposal that she should reply to it *not* in words, or in writing, but in the following manner.

I must here explain that the library at the Hall had been devoted to the use of the younger son, "the scholar," as he was rather sneeringly called by his father, a fox-hunting Squire of the old school; and that he had lately been studying Italian, a lan-

guage which Bessie Clavering loved, and which she spoke with a pure Tuscan accent, acquired abroad. A rare and beautiful edition of Dante's "Inferno" had lately been purchased by him, intended as an offering to his beautiful mistress. But he had not yet heard from her lips, in unmistakable language, the actual confession of her love; and, like many other wayward, spoilt beauties, she had the character among men of being a heartless coquette, who exercised her wonderful fascination over men to their hurt.

"If you really love me," he wrote, "and I have not construed mere pity for the position I hold in my father's house into that warmer feeling, give the simple sign I ask; steal into the library about sunset, when Geoffrey and my father are at the stables, and my mother is taking her afternoon *siesta* in her room, and you will find there on my desk a volume of Dante, open at a certain page. If you love me, take up the pen which you will find ready to your hand,

and score under the lines, in the third canto,

> "Men che dramma
> Di sangue m' è rimasa, che non tremi;
> Conosco i segni dell' antica fiamma;"

but if, on the contrary, I have deceived myself, and it is my brother Geoffrey whom you love—I saw you smile when he said he was training Jessica for you the other day—I beseech you to blot them out, as you will have blotted out the hopes of my life.

"Yours in life or death, but ever yours,

"RICHARD MARCHMONT."

This letter was never delivered into the hands for which it was intended; but at sunset on the same evening a female form stole into the quaint old room, the very odour of which spoke to the senses of a dead past, and a female hand, with the violence of ungovernable passion, flung two lurid blots across the fair pages of the open book. It was that act which had made shipwreck of Richard Marchmont's life. He had hardly expected it, for he had good reason to

believe that Bessie Clavering loved him; but something in her nature had made him fear that, after all, his fate might be thus sealed, as that of others had been before him. He had remained standing for more than an hour before his desk gazing at the ill-omened sign, and then, turning away with set lips and a broken heart, he took the fatal book in his hands, and quitted the apartment for ever, as he then intended it should be.

He shut himself up for two days; and Bessie Clavering, who was as high-spirited as she was beautiful, deeply resented his defalcation, and openly flirted with Geoffrey as only a woman can flirt, with some bitter conviction gnawing at her heart. On the third day of Richard's withdrawal from the family circle, during which period no one had particularly troubled themselves about him (except that one who troubled herself too much for her peace of mind), a low tap was heard at the door.

"Come in," he said mechanically, thinking it was the servant whose business it was

to attend upon him, and who, as his mother said, understood his odd ways, and not even raising his eyes as the injunction was obeyed; and some one entering the apartment, he said, "Put down the tray, John—I am busy now," and soon forgot the presence of the intruder, as he became once more engrossed in what he was about. Presently he felt some one touch his arm, and the touch, tender, although passionate, was not the touch of a man. There was something in the nature of it which caused him to start, and a well of undefined, tumultuous hope gushed up into his heart, for he believed it was the hand of his beloved. He looked up; at his side was the temptress, beautiful as with the dark lurid beauty of a fallen angel—Lettice, his mother's maid, knelt at his feet, the sweeping tresses of her hair unbound, and falling about her in picturesque disarray.

He had never before seen her but in the conventional dress of a waiting-woman—never realised her youth, her girlhood, as he did at that moment—never before guess-

ed at the secret which, a secret no longer, beamed upon him from the depths of those magnificent eyes.

"Mr. Richard," she whispered softly, although the words which followed this preliminary address dropped like molten lead upon the young man's ear, "do you wish to be cured of your love for the girl with the doll's face, who has thrown you over for your elder brother because he is rich—because he is the heir? Come with me——come here."

As she spoke she again put her hand upon his arm, and led him to the window at the end of the long dim corridor, which overlooked the south terrace, over which the drawing-room windows opened. There Richard beheld a sight which seemed to sear into his very brain. His brother Geoffrey—his *elder* brother, as Lettice had so artfully insinuated—and Bessie Clavering were standing in the rich sunset glows of evening, which played amongst her beautiful hair, and lighted up the beauty, which had proved a snare to so many, into almost su-

pernatural splendour. So, indeed, seemed to think the man who was standing at her side, gazing into the depths of those beautiful eyes, which appeared, in the distorted imagination of the younger brother, to be actually beaming with love.

"You see," exclaimed Lettice, convulsively clutching the arm from which she had never released her hold, "you see now what puppets like her call true love! Look at her—look at me—which is the handsomer of the two?—and which of us, Mr. Richard, loves you best? Do not spurn me—do not cast me away from you, Mr. Richard!—I have loved you so true!"

A madness for a moment stirred the youthful blood of Richard Marchmont—a madness which sealed his future fate! He looked into the pleading, eloquent eyes beside him, and he looked down at the scene below.

"Lettice," he said, drawing her nearer to him, "you are a faithful girl—you, and you only, shall be my wife. I am going for a long voyage—my preparations are all

made. Have you love enough, courage enough to go with me? Remember, you are deciding for life, for I will never return to this place alive."

There was a world of faithful love (as he thought) in the answer that beamed more in Lettice's eyes than found utterance through the medium of her tongue. At last she whispered, "I will go with you, Mr. Richard, to the end of the world, if you ask me."

Something in the mode of the address jarred upon the refined and sensitive nature of Richard Marchmont.

"Do not call me *Mr. Richard* now, Lettice," he said; "you are to be my wife, remember—wives do not so address their husbands."

"I will go with you, Richard," the girl whispered softly; and who could have believed that the gentle face upturned to him in the twilight was the same which not long before had lighted up with malignant passion as Lettice (for it was she) flung the fatal blot across the fair pages of the open book.

It was the memory of these passages in his former life—a life which now seemed to come back to him, phantomy and unreal, like a dream, which he (now known as Colonel le Garde) recalled, as he stood looking down upon the fair young girl from the window at the end of the corridor, and pondered over his next step.

Like Bessie, he fully realized the expediency of the Squire's being induced to appoint guardians to the young child in case of his decease, which, now, those nearest and dearest to him perceived to be not very far off. But on the other hand, the dark and clouded state of his intellect threw a doubt upon the possible legality of such a document, even should it be drawn up and duly attested by the family lawyer before the actual decease should occur.

At that moment Bessie looked up. Something in the attitude, the expression, the very movement reminded him forcibly of her mother, and he determined, whatever happened, to be faithful to her child's cause to the end. She was an heiress still, though

quite unconscious of the fact; for the savings of a frugal life, out of what would be considered by many "a handsome fortune," would be hers at Uncle Rex's death. But Marchmont, beautiful Marchmont, with its wide acres and stately mansion, would pass into other hands.

Bessie beckoned to him to come down to her; and with halting gait and head bent upon his bosom, as though weighed down with the weight of thought, Colonel Marchmont went down and joined his niece in the garden.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

LONDON: PRINTED BY MACDONALD AND TUGWELL, BLENHEIM HOUSE.

17

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